

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

Seeds of change

Peninsula Permaculture · March 18, 2021 · Page A-11



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Katuk, a Southeast Asian leaf vegetable that's 49% protein, is making its best showing this year. (Photo courtesy of Alex Féthière)

In the dead of winter, many of us are thrilled by brightly colored catalogs arriving in our mail. The thought of planting what they advertise gets us through innumerable chilly downpours and frosts.

COVID-19 seems to have accelerated the seed-buying cycle. Though I started two weeks early this year, in the first week of January, I saw that a couple of items had already sold out. By the same token, suppliers might have added capacity. I bought the usual excess of everything and, going back for anything I'd forgotten, found that my favorite sites still had stock.

So I thought I'd write a bit about what and how I'm planting this year, especially because permaculture often emphasizes plants outside the usual tomatoes and cucumbers. Seed-saving, heirlooms and breeding programs should have a place in any organized horticulture. I'm hoping to systematize well enough this year that I can control for and monitor results in some interesting experimental crops.

Practicing crop rotation has necessitated diverse plantings. For example, I can't plant garlic in the same place for six years.

Experimental Farm Network (experimentalfarmnetwork.org) is my biggest source this year. It's impossible to read its website without getting jazzed about something potentially transcendental.

Now that I'm soaking rice before cooking, it's easier to digest so I'm planting Zerawchanica, a Polish short-season (100-110 day) variety. It's easy to harvest and thresh, and short enough that wind won't knock it over.

Denver Perennial Ground Cherry is sold out, but if I'm successful I'll have seeds at season's end. Ground cherries usually thrive, but why replant them when they'll sprout and spread from a deep perennial rhizome? Six- to 8-inch height is also exciting; mine have always been sprawling and unwieldy. Deer and slugs have usually spared my ground cherries, which is good because surplus dries nicely.

I've never been lucky with parsley, and local friends have said they can't grow flat-leafed varieties. Rich in vitamin A, tasty and versatile, fresh parsley is essential to my cooking. This year's Hungarian

Landrace Parsley supplements some that self-seeded from last year, and its resistance to *Xanthomonas* is a plus.

Black rot loves plants in the Brassica genus and though I've prevented it so far by crop rotation, it's a real kneecapper if you get it. You may have noticed that seed companies such as Adaptive ship from Oregon with certified *Xanthomonas*-free seed.

Because mallows have flourished — my Black Hollyhock in the South Sound has outstripped growth in New York City in spite of aphids and slugs — I'm trying Korean silk flower, a close relative of okra grown for its nutritious, abundant greens. At 150 tons per acre, it might be the most productive leaf crop on earth (compare to cabbage's ideal, 50 tons per acre).

Paradise Lot Leaf Goji is still in the breeding stage, so I'll be propagating cuttings from it when the plants are big enough. I never tire of new leaf vegetables and this improved Chinese variety is grown for its leaves, not the fruit that in this strain is edible but bitter. I have yet to figure out how far to plant it from my existing goji plants to prevent cross-pollination.

This year I've been hitting the baby slugs hard, so maybe I'll get away with purple carrots. WI-OSC (Wisconsin Open-Source Composite) purple carrots have a purple skin with purple, orange or white interiors!

I'm taking James Wong's advice on how to plant them, though he's more concerned with carrot fly than slugs. I'll likely write about his book "Grow for Flavor" later; it's so packed with information that it's the 2021 odds-on favorite.

For now, let's just say that I'll be soaking my seeds in aspirin and seaweed solution before sowing. Just 2 teaspoons and one-quarter of a 300 mg soluble aspirin in a quart of water improved germination of soybeans, corn, peppers, beans and tomatoes after an overnight soak. There's that seaweed again, just as I'm strewing it over the asparagus beds.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*