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Three in one

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Punky scorzonera is all floppy angles. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Perhaps early Christian theologians arrived from outer space. That they could miss metaphorical opportunities like scorzonera suggests that they'd never eaten the foods of medieval Europe. Struggling to compare the Holy Trinity to the states of water (ice, water, steam) or eggs (white, yolk, shell) seems harder than to a living plant.

Because I risk heresy in proceeding much further, let's just say that scorzonera offers three vegetables in one: root, flower and leaf. And the flower has two food-modes to offer, in petals or buds.

Grown primarily as a root crop, scorzonera is more popular in Europe. Its Old World-sounding name has no smack of American marketing. If you translated it literally into English — “black bark” — it still needs sexing up. “Black salsify,” because it is related to that other tasty root, might not stick because few I've met have tasted salsify. From my garden, salsify root is like parsnip with a distinct artichoke-like flavor. Delicious!

Scorzonera has more succulent leaves than salsify, and its flowers have more to offer as well on the plate. Yet in the looks department, salsify flowers take the prize: spiky and purple where scorzonera's are floppy and yellow.

I planted scorzonera seeds in a bed cleared of celtuce last fall. I had hoped they'd be a winter vegetable, but the leaves never got longer than a couple of inches before they were easily grazed away by slugs.

In spring, one of the first perennials to return was the scorzonera. Improved slug control and perhaps the gastropods' seasonal preference for something else meant I finally got to taste the leaves.

Scorzonera leaves are indeed like a lettuce, but firmer and the lovely petals have an interesting cress-like bitterness that livens up a salad. Raw flower buds are a little bitter with a dusty pollen sweetness but the flavor of steamed flower buds is so much like artichokes that I lost the will to pull up even one root to cook for this column.

Salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*) root tastes like parsnips and artichokes. I don't find it tastes like oysters as the lore says. Scorzonera (*Scorzonera hispanica*) root, slightly preferred by The Washington Post, is said to taste similar.

That is, unless you chop it and candy it with citrus zest to make Portugal's traditional "scorzonera sweet." Because this preparation bears the seal of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity's "Ark of Taste," I'll be trying it in fall when I pull up most of last fall's scorzonera roots. Accounts vary on how well the root cellars in place, so I'll harvest them periodically for the next couple of years, always saving some seed.

Their sprawling habit and perennial disposition suggests they don't need to be in beds. Hopefully, the moist rich soil of garden beds won't make the roots fork and spider as it did salsify's. In Portugal they're grown in sandy, well-draining limy soils, so this year I'll plant some like George Washington might: on a soil-retaining terrace made of rotting wood, covered with manure and topsoil before planting.

At the time of this writing, Adaptive Seeds still has scorzonera in stock, and in this "January" spring it's not too late to plant them. I did last week, and now they're growing faster than my peppers — but then, so is arctic ice.

■ *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.*

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