

Perennial Vegetables

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By July my garden is looking pretty sad. Most plants have finished bearing and the heat and humidity have taken their toll on the delicious crops I planted in spring. What I wouldn't give for some fresh crisp lettuces to go with the rest of the salad vegetables still hanging on. Fall and its garden bounty of greens and root vegetables of all kinds seems a long time away. And it's too hot to spend much time in the garden anyway.

Recently I discovered there are multiple varieties of edible plants that thrive with little attention in the summer conditions in our area. Generally classified as perennial vegetables, some are true perennials, and some return year after year with a little help.

When I think of perennial vegetables, asparagus or rhubarb usually come to mind. They can be grown here but they prefer cooler climates to really thrive.

Many of the new varieties we have been growing at the VegHeadz demonstration vegetable garden at the Leon County Extension Office originate in the tropics and have been grown there or harvested from the wild for centuries. They prefer sun to part shade and moist soil.

Most of the perennials we have tried die back in the winter and re-sprout in early summer. A few we grew without any type of protection did not return and will need to be replanted and covered during cold spells, sheltered in a greenhouse, or moved indoors during freezing weather. Southern exposures and micro climates near buildings may mean the difference between survival and re-planting.

Some of our favorites which have returned this summer are:

- Edible Elephant Ear (*Xanthosoma brasiliense*), sometimes known as Tannier Spinach or Tahitian Taro. The leaves and stems should be cooked before eating to remove oxalates. The stems are often cooked as a separate vegetable like chard or bok choy. The leaves make great "spinach" dip or any other cooked spinach recipe. Not all types of elephant ear are edible, so use care in selecting plants for your perennial garden. In addition many varieties are classified as invasive exotic plants, so take care to contain them within your garden and not plant near waterways.
- Okinawa Spinach (*Gynura crepioides*). This attractive plant provides a low ground cover while the leaves and top four to six inches of the shoots are harvested. The more you harvest, the more is produced. The small leaves, about twice the size of Bay leaves, are dark green on the top with a bright purple underside. They add interest to summer salads, and can also be steamed, juiced, or used in stir fries, soups, or smoothies.
- Sochan (*Rudbeckia laciniata*) or Cherokee Greens. Leaves can be harvested and eaten raw in salads, or cooked and used like Kale or Spinach. It is important to grow the correct species, as other similar Rudbeckias may be toxic.

- Sweet Potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*). Sweet potatoes aren't usually thought of as perennials, but the small tubers and fleshy roots left behind during harvest will sprout again in the spring and provide a new crop. The vines sprawl along the ground and provide efficient weed control as well as fresh greens for your salads or cooked dishes, and a bountiful harvest of tubers in the fall. 'Beauregard' is the variety usually sold in supermarkets and it also produces well in our garden. Two purple varieties 'Stokes Purple®' with purple skin and flesh and Hawaiian or Okinawan purple with light skin and purple flesh are prolific and fun to grow and eat. While Yams (*Dioscorea* spp.) are an entirely different species, they are difficult to distinguish on sight from sweet potatoes and we don't make any attempt to do so. Adding to the confusion, many varieties are mislabeled, so we just enjoy growing different ones and don't worry about which species they belong to.
- Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) or Sunchoke. These vigorous plants grow six to 12 feet tall and benefit from some support. They can be pinched back to control their height. Roots harvested in the fall provide crisp crunchy meat similar to water chestnuts to add to salads and stir fries. Leave a few roots in the ground to return for next year's crop.
- Yacon (*Smallanthus sonchifolia*) or Bolivian Sunroot. This light green plant grows to several feet tall and produces sweet, crisp tubers to eat raw or cook in most root crop recipes. The roots are best harvested after the first frost, but the stems and young leaves can also be eaten during the summer.

You won't find most of these vegetables in our local nurseries. In addition to online sources, they can sometimes be obtained from local gardeners, and the Edible Plant Project sells plants and seeds at the Union Street Farmers Market in Gainesville. Check their website (www.edibleplantproject.org) for more information.

If you are interested in learning more about perennial vegetables, the book Perennial Vegetables: From Artichokes to Zuiki Taro, A Gardener's Guide to Over 100 Delicious and Easy to Grow Edibles by Eric Toensmeier is a good source.

You can visit the Demonstration Garden at any time during office hours to see how our garden is growing. Let it be an inspiration to try something new in your summer garden.

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