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# SOME UNCOMMON VEGETABLES for the FARM GARDEN

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It is quite usual to try from time to time something new in the flower garden, but new introductions into the vegetable garden are much less common. We tend, often with good reason, to stick to the better-known and well tried vegetables.

Our seed suppliers obviously tend to stock seeds of vegetables which they will be asked for; these seeds are asked for because they are well-known; they are well known because the seedsmen stock them—in other words a sort of vicious circle. During recent years at Lincoln we have grown a number of the more unusual vegetables for educational and exhibiting purposes and this has given us an opportunity to observe many points relating to these vegetables particularly with regard to their ability to succeed under the drier Canterbury conditions.

Many of the vegetables mentioned in this bulletin are not new in the true sense of the word—perhaps they have just been forgotten due to change of fashion or changing tastes.

At this stage it would be as well to distinguish between the words " kind " and " variety " of vegetable, words which are often confused in show schedules. Cabbages, cauliflowers, parsnips and carrots are *kinds* of vegetables; Golden Acre, Early London, Hollow Crown and Scarlet Horn are *varieties* respectively of these vegetables.

Most members of the Brassica genus are well-known and widely grown but there are certain members of this group which deserve wider recognition. There are, for example, several uncommon varieties of Broccoli (Brassica oleracea botrytis cymosa) known as *Purple, Green and White Sprouting. Purple Sprouting Broccoli* probably deserves pride of place. The edible portion consists of the immature, purple flowering shoots which are produced in large numbers during late winter when vegetables are often in short supply. Sowing and planting procedure for purple sprouting broccoli and also for *Curly Kale* (Brassica oleracea acephala), another very useful late winter vegetable, is similar to that of winter cabbage or savoy, i.e. sow mid-November and plant mid-January about two feet apart each way.

Another close relative is the *Turnip-Rooted Cabbage or Kohl Rabi* (Brassica oleracea caulo-rapa) which has something in common with both turnips and cabbages. The edible part in this case, often referred to as the root, is actually the swollen stem. It makes a very satisfactory substitute for turnips and has the added virtue of

tolerating dry conditions. It is essentially a sumer vegetable and is generally sown for succession between September and February. For best results Kohl Rabi should be grown quickly and used when about as large as a tennis ball. There are green, white and purple varieties, but there appears to be little difference apart from colour.

Space will not allow full details of cultivation and so on, but it should be remembered that all members of the cabbage tribe, including those just mentioned, are subject to similar pests and diseases—cabbage aphis, white butterfly caterpillar, club root and many others—against which suitable control measures will have to be taken.

Common names of plants are often misleading and one of the best examples amongst our vegetables would be the *Jerusalem Artichoke* (Helianthus tuberosus)—it is not a true artichoke and does not come from Jerusalem. There are actually three vegetables known as *Artichokes*—the *Jerusalem Artichoke,* the *Chinese Artichoke* (Stachys tuberifera) and the *Globe Artichoke* (Cynara scolymus). Of these the *Jerusalem Artichoke* is probably the most widely known. It is closely related to the sunflower but although it grows tall leafy stems the flowers are quite small and it produces numerous fleshy tubers rather like knobbly potatoes which have a high nutritive value. Jerusalem artichokes are easily grown and can be treated like potatoes as far as planting is concerned, planting usually taking place in September. The tall stems make an effective temporary windbreak and a row of Jerusalem artichokes could well be utilised for protecting cucumbers, dwarf beans and other less hardy crops. The tubers are best left in the ground to be dug as required and make a very useful stand-by for winter use.

*Chinese Artichokes* are rather more novel than useful. They produce clusters of small white tubers which are difficult to clean and difficult to store. Unless kept in damp sand over winter they are liable to shrivel. The tubers are not unlike large grubs in appearance and maybe this accounts for their lack of popularity.

The *Globe Artichoke* is a grey-leaved perennial resembling an outsized thistle. The scales of the immature flower bud are the edible portion and are regarded by many as a delicacy. Globe artichokes can be raised from seed or increased by suckers removed from established plants in September, each plant being allowed three to four feet. Apart from its rather limited value as a vegetable, globe artichokes make handsome perennial plants for the flower border, their large grey divided leaves blending effectively with other colours.

A name which should appeal to the vegetable connoisseur is the *Vegetable Oyster* or more correctly *Salsify* (Tragopogon porrifolius). Imaginations differ widely but salsify when cooked does have an oyster flavour and is probably entitled to the rather distinguished title. Salsify produces a leek-like leaf and the edible part, the root, is not unlike a narow parsnip in appearance. It can be sown during spring and early summer and dug as required. Ground recently manured with fresh organic manure should be avoided as salsify like many root crops tends to fork freely under such conditions. A related vegetable known as *Black Salsify* or *Scorzonera* (Scorzonera hispanica) has been described in earlier literature as "one of the most important root vegetables both for its flavour and for its wholesome qualities." Today, however, one rarely sees scorzonera and one reason advanced for its decline in popularity is the modern custom of peeling root vegetables and subjecting them to pressure cooker treatment, treatment which particularly for salsify and scorzonera causes much of the flavour to be lost.

Most gardeners grow a few tomatoes but are content to stick to the more orthodox types. There are many tomatoes, both kinds and varieties. The *Yellow Tomato* (Lycopersicon esculentum var.) for example, at one

time very popular, is not often seen today. It is treated in the same way as an ordinary staked variety but produces bright yellow fruits, which are considered by many to be sweeter and more palatable than the red varieties. They usually crop well and a good variety such as Golden Queen is usually reliable. Incidentally, it is well worth while saving seed from a good type of plant; the percentage of outcrossing in tomatoes is very small and there is no reason why a keen home gardener should not work up a good strain of seed from his own plants provided that he selects fruits from good plants and not just fruits at random from here and there.

There are several tomatoes which, though useful, are rather more of a novelty from the garden point of view. The small pear-shaped tomato, the cherry or cocktail tomato, the plum-shaped tomato and the currant-fruited tomato, are all well-named and although hardly suitable for a main meal they can be used with good effect for decorative purposes or at the children's party. The currant fruited variety which is resistant to certain diseases has proved invaluable to the plant breeder in helping to produce disease resistant varieties.

As far as actual range of varieties is concerned, few vegetables could equal the peas and beans. A collection of dwarf beans alone would make an imposing array. Although it is difficult to single out one or two varieties for special mention the *Waxpod or Butter Bean* (Phaseolus vulgaris var.) which is treated in the same way as the ordinary dwarf or French bean, i.e. sown towards the end of October or early November, deserves attention. The term " Waxpod " is perhaps more suitable because the term butter-bean suggests the dried beans one sees in the shops. Waxpod beans with their attractive yellow pods are quick maturing, stringless if used when young and good croppers; several good varieties are available.

Those who have spent many hours shelling peas might like to try the *Edible-Podder or Sugar Pea* (Pisum sativum var.) It is a vigorous grower and a heavy cropper, and has the advantage that, before cooking, pods need merely topping and tailing. Pods should be gathered when the peas in them can be felt easily but before they grow too large, and, another important point, they must be cooked as soon as possible after picking.

The squash, marrow and pumpkin family, also provides us with a wide range of fruits varying enormously in shape, size and colour. The term fruit is used here of course in the strict botanical sense. Of the marrows the *South African Trailing Marrow* (Cucurbita sp.) has done particularly well at Lincoln. Treated in the same way as ordinary marrows it produces dozens of small fruits similar to a grapefruit in size and shape. At first green, they eventually turn a deep orange colour and at this stage keep well through the winter. They are a more useful size than most members of the family and can if desired be cooked whole. Unlike most of its relatives it seems to come reasonably true from seed without isolation and one African marrow will produce sufficient seed for the neighbourhood.

Similar in flavour but very different in shape from the ordinary marrow is the *Custard Marrow or Scollop* (Cucurbita sp.). There are both white and yellow varieties and in shape they bear a striking resemblance to a custard tart.

Although not suitable for culinary use the *Ornamental Gourds* (Cucurbita sp.) are worthy of a place in the garden. The array of fruits produced by these ornamental gourds is remarkable — round, oval and pear - shaped, smooth, ribbed and knobbly, all one colour or a mixture of colours. They are most attractive for winter decorative work and if varnished when ripe they keep for many months. Beware, however, of ornamental gourds in the

kitchen, for many of them are extremely bitter and just one, no matter how attractive it may look, could ruin a potentially good dinner. Appearances can be deceptive.

The red or pickling cabbage is fairly well known, but the *Red Silver Beet* (Beta vulgaris cicla) is much less common. It is sold under various names such as *Rhubarb Chard* and *Crimson Chard* but *Red Silver Beet* is probably the most descriptive. It is in fact a red form of the ordinary silver beet and as far as cultivation is concerned is treated in exactly the same way. It appears to be less prone to rust, other diseases and to damage than is the ordinary variety.

The majority of our vegetables have been introduced from overseas but there is one New Zealand native which should not be overlooked—*New Zealand Spinach* (Tetragonia expansa). Although not a true spinach its fresh succulent leaves can be used in the same way and it has the great advantage that it succeeds in the driest and hottest of sumers. New Zealand spinach is half-hardy annual and should not be sown in frosty districts before the end of October. Once established the plant produces side shoots in abundance and these can be gathered as required during the summer.

In conclusion, the examples mentioned do not by any means cover all of those which may be included under the heading of uncommon vegetables. Notable omisions are the *False Yam* (Oxalis crenata) and *Endive* (Cichorium endivia). Variety is the spice of life but one would be most unwise to sacrifice the more orthodox and well-tried vegetables in order to grow a large number of the unusual. However, perhaps those mentioned above will encourage the reader to depart a little from the usual routine and extend the range of vegetables grown for home use.

Copies of this Bulletin may be obtained from the Secretary, Canterbury Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 187, Christchurch.