

The Canadian Organic Grower

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digging potatoes on Cape Breton
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EDITOR'S CORNER

Notes from the underground

I love growing root crops. There's something wonderful about pulling up a sweetpotato vine and discovering a clutch of purple-skinned orange-fleshed tubers...or reaching under a potato plant and gathering new potatoes as gently as collecting warm eggs from under a hen. Then there's garlic—an essential part of my daily diet that is easy to grow, very flavourful and healthy, as well.

Part of the appeal of root crops is that you can't see the edible part develop. You don't have the experience of watching flowers turn into small beans, tomatoes or squash, which, in turn, grow and ripen into harvestable crops. Each year, the first time I grub for new potatoes, I don't know what size tubers I'll find. (Although, after several years of finding marble-sized tubers, I've learned to curb my eagerness for new potatoes and wait at least a couple of weeks after flowering has started.)

Root crops provide more than just garden pleasure. In our long Canadian winters, roots provide nutritious food. The bounty of the summer can be stored all winter. Home gardeners can store what they grow themselves. Market gardeners can provide food for their customers year round. Savvy consumers, depending on their housing situation, might be able to buy bulk produce in the fall and store it in their own homes. The beauty of root crops is that they can be stored without freezing or canning; most roots can be simply harvested, cured and stored for months.

The crops we dig from the soil

give us energy when snow covers the fields. A stew with potatoes, carrots and onions is comforting and warming. Switch the seasonings and it can be a winter curry. Add sweetpotatoes, gôbô and daikon, and the dish becomes exotic and home-grown at the same time.

Many root crops, especially beets, carrots and sweetpotatoes, are rich in natural sugars. Consequently, they are perfect foods for when the weather grows cold and our energy needs increase. The dense nutrition in the crops has led to other uses. Livestock devour root crops (with the notable exception of plants in the onion family). When I had sheep and goats, I fed them cull potatoes, carrots and beets, in addition to hay. We were all content with the arrangement. I was using food that would otherwise be composted, they had nutritious food, and they certainly enjoyed eating the culls.

Unfortunately, some other uses of roots don't have such positive outcomes. Sugar beets are refined into white sugar, which is then added to all sorts of processed foods. The high rates of diabetes and obesity may be a reflection of this.

A more ominous use has just cropped up. While I was thinking about this editorial and enjoying juicy new garlic and steamed new potatoes, I heard a news item about the sugar beet. Plans to develop an ethanol plant using sugar beets had fallen through on P.E.I., and now the same players want to start a plant in Nova Scotia. They will need a huge amount of land to be converted

to sugar beets. I should add that sugar beets are not a common crop in the Maritimes, and Nova Scotia doesn't have much unused arable land. Golf courses and subdivisions keep encroaching on the best land. But I'm starting to rant. The folly of growing food crops for ethanol is well publicized, but often dismissed. The radio report didn't mention that the original plan involved trials of Monsanto's latest—genetically engineered sugar beets with resistance to the herbicide Roundup.



Sweetpotatoes in Janet's garden.

The crops we dig from the soil give us energy when snow covers the fields.

Beyond the ethical and environmental consequences of using food for fuel, there is something else that disturbs me. Perhaps soul-destroying is too strong a term to refer to such actions, perhaps not.

Food is essential. Food is culture. Food is not simply an industrial material.

I never want to lose the reverence I hold for the crops I grow. Despite the countless hours spent squashing potato beetles,

the discomfort of planting garlic with frozen fingers knowing snow is in the forecast, the aching back from digging crops when heavy rain is imminent, I can't imagine *not* growing these plants.

This year, I helped a number of novice gardeners discover new crops and growing methods. At one point, a friend showed me her potato plants in flower. She was thrilled with the plants—their beauty, their promise and the whole mystery of what was happening beneath the soil.

I began to wonder if simply sharing enthusiasm about food could be the key to solving many problems. We can support people who want to grow some of their own food (and this alone is a huge step) and, in doing so, introduce them to the sense of wonder and appreciation that keeps so many

of us in the field, barns and gardens.

In this issue, we praise many root crops. (We're using the term to refer to all crops where the edible part is underground, be it a root, tuber, corm or bulb.) We give tips on how to grow and eat various crops. That said, we cover only a small number of plants. If we had more pages, we would discuss Jerusalem artichokes, which grow like weeds and produce healthy potato-sized tubers; salisfy, which tastes like an oyster but no shucking is involved; black radishes, which a friend of mine used to eat for lunch in his hometown of Paris along with a baguette, butter, salt and a bottle of wine; sweetpotatoes, which produce delicious and nutritious tubers that store for more than a year. Then there are crosnes, Japanese yams, turnips, chufa nuts, rutabagas and many more.

Hopefully this magazine will encourage you to try more root crops in your diet and in your garden. And maybe you can share the experience with others, first at the table and then in the field. Revelling in root crops is a simple way Canadians can increase their food security while enjoying healthy, locally grown organic food.

—Janet Wallace
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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Morning mist

What a lovely colour photo on the cover of the Summer issue! The mist rising off the fields has been caught perfectly. The young people working there seem cheerful and refreshed, so I would guess it's about 6 a.m. Beautiful.

I also loved the page of tips on tomato growing, which arrived at exactly the right time of year.

—Robin Guard
Toronto, Ontario

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