

# From the garden

# Vegetables: Are you eating the sun?

By Belinda Gallagher

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I am part way through one of the more interesting reads of recent years. The book is entitled *Eating the Sun: How Plants Power the Planet* by author and scientist Oliver Morton (Harper Collins Publishers 2007). I was captured by the introductory chapter and have since been spending many an evening trying to comprehend the science.

What I can say with certainty at this moment is that I have an even greater appreciation of the plants that surround my life. And more importantly, an appreciation of the plants of my past.

My first recollection of a plant was the peppery smell of columbine growing on the east side of my childhood home in Sparks, Nevada.

In that desert setting, the plant (*Aquilegia* sp.) needed the shade of the house in the heat of the afternoon. The second plant was a big healthy squash. It was a squash vine, not the bush form of later years and must have consumed most of the vegetable garden. I can't remember if it was a zucchini or acorn. It may have been a pumpkin for all I know, or a cucumber. But it was big— bigger than big for a small child. It was reminiscent of the Jack and the Beanstalk bedtime story and there it was, in my backyard!

My dad tended the vegetables; my mother the flowers. I played in the mud left by an errant garden hose. But in those early years, I learned to love both flowers and vegetables. It was the best gift that my parents ever gave me, way better than Barbie and Ken.

Now, so many years later, I am back to vegetables. I have had the occasional brush with food crops along the years— a brilliant garden among the rocks in Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia within view of the Atlantic Ocean; 30 different vegetables in bushel baskets on a patio in Montreal; herbs in pots on a balcony in London, England— to name a few. But now it is business. Part of my job at Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington.

This year I have had the opportunity to visit other botanical gardens in the United States and it seems that vegetables are on everyone's plate.

The Coastal Maine Botanical Garden included vegetables in their display called 'Five Senses' and the Atlanta Botanical Garden included a modern



Atlanta Botanical Gardens

vegetable garden in their multi-million dollar renovation.

At RBG, we are opening a new display garden called Veggie Village: 100 Mile Produce Gardens (see sidebar page 11) and I am up close and personal to the world of produce once again. I would like to share with you some of my favourites, some hints, some failures and some philosophy. Come along on the journey.



Swiss chard

One of my favourite vegetables in the last few years is Swiss chard, and my favourite cultivar is 'Bright Lights' which was an All American Select (AAS) award winner in 1998. Granted, it took my mom a number of years to get me to eat

chard and just as many years for me to convince my husband the carnivore! But after all that persuading, this is the vegetable of choice. It is easy to grow from seed sown in late spring, grows fairly quickly, tolerates the heat of summer and the cool temperatures of the fall and early winter and keeps on producing those luscious leaves the whole time.

The 'Bright Lights' cultivar sports leaf stems of yellow, pink, white and red and is at home in the veggie garden or the flower border.

DiGiralomo's Greenhouses south of Georgetown, is using it in fall planters and it looks great with ornamental cabbage, millet, sage and perennials. Just be sure to pick the outside leaves on a regular basis and you can eat this green for months.

Next on my list is the summer squash called 'Sunburst Hybrid'. It is the yellow version of 'Peter Pan' and I always called this style a patty-pan squash.

Sunburst is another AAS winner and is an easy bush-type squash that is fine in the ground or a large container. It takes 45 to 60 days to reach

maturity and the little yellow, scalloped-edged squashes should be picked when they are 4-5 inches across for the best flavour and texture.

My vegetarian friends Joel and Jodi suggested layering this squash with thinly sliced onion, garlic and tomatoes drizzled with oil and seasoned with salt and pepper and cooked in foil on the barbeque. It was so much better than zucchini.

Broccoli is just a bit more fiddle to grow than squash, but worth it for several reasons. On a purely practical note, you can eat it hot or cold, cooked or raw, embellished or not. Best started 4 to 6 weeks before planting out in a nice sandy loam, broccoli likes a little extra nitrogen and a regular watering regime. With broccoli, this cousin to cabbage, you are eating the flower buds. Pick it before the buds open and keep a watchful eye in hot weather as the buds open more quickly.

The bonus reason for growing and eating broccoli is the numerous health benefits. These benefits are attributed to certain antioxidants and phytochemicals produced by the plant when it 'eats the sun'. ('Phyto' is derived from the Greek word for plant.)

Broccoli is an excellent source of calcium making it useful against osteoporosis, high in fiber which is good for lots of ills, and contains chemicals which have shown to assist in fighting cancer.

Everyone has their own favourite tomato. And I would venture to say it is a home grown tomato, just picked off the vine on a hot August day. I would also suggest that for most, the actual cultivar is not as important as the fact that it comes from their own backyard. In most cases this is true, but for even more of that luscious summertime flavour you can't beat some of the heritage varieties that are becoming increasingly available.

Actually, the tomato is the vegetable to discuss when speaking about the taste of home grown versus one purchased in a supermarket. *Seeds of Diversity* suggests that 'While over 800 cultivars of tomatoes are available to gardeners, most super-

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'Bright Lights' cultivar



Sunburst hybrid squash



Broccoli

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