



Alamosa Landscapes

Consider Perennial Vegetables

by Marilyn Loser

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Folks who have followed this column know I now plant fewer annual flowers and more perennial flowers and shrubs as they are easier to maintain. I'm now turning my thoughts to a wider range of perennial vegetables. I must admit I haven't thought a lot about this before!

Most people are familiar with asparagus (*Asparagaceae*) and rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbarum*) that are perennial vegetables that do well in Alamosa. Yes, rhubarb is officially a vegetable even though many consider it a fruit as it is used in desserts. Some websites also lump fruits such as blackberries, gooseberries, and currants in their lists of perennials vegetables; but they are fruits.

Botanically speaking, "a fruit is a seed-bearing structure that develops from the ovary of a flowering plant, whereas vegetables are all other plant parts, such as roots, leaves and stems," according to the livescience.com website. Informally, we often classify an edible plant depending on usage. For example, we usually consider eggplants, bell peppers, and tomatoes to be vegetables when they are actually fruits.

I know of Alamosans who have successfully grown Egyptian or bunching onions (*Allium cepa*) and Jerusalem artichokes (also called sunchokes -- *Helianthus tuberosus*). The onions are tasty small bulbs that grow at the top of stalks in late summer so they are easy to see and harvest. A number of years ago sunchokes were all the rage and I bought some in a supermarket. They are the tuberous roots of a sunflower plant and have a slightly nutty and sweet taste. They can be served raw, roasted, fried, pureed into soups, or steamed. I'm considering trying both of these this summer if I can find a supplier!

Day lilies (*Hemerocallis spp.*) grow well in Alamosa and I always thought they were only an ornamental. I didn't realize that they are cultivated as a vegetable in Asia. Apparently, the flower buds are harvested and cooked like green beans. The flowers are served in salads or battered and fried. Wonder if they are similar to zucchini flowers treated in the same way?

One year we tried lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) kindly shared by a friend. The young leaves and stalks are often used in spring as a substitute for celery in soups. Reputed to grow as tall as six feet tall, ours didn't thrive. The first-year flavor was nice. Rated as hardy to zone 4, I may try again.

I've planted and loved scarlet runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) as an annual and didn't realize they are a perennial. I never gave them a chance to return as I dug up the vegetable garden in early spring before they had a chance to sprout. They have wonderful red flowers and fine green beans.

There are a number of perennial vegetables that evidently grow in Colorado that I'm not familiar with. One is the native American ground cherry (*Apios American Medicus*) that still grows on the eastern plains. Rated down to zone 3 by epicgardening.com, this nitrogen-fixing, 6-foot vine bears high-protein tubers that taste like nutty-flavored potatoes and are harvested in the fall. Mother Nature News suggests growing the vines as Native Americans did-- near a shrub (as support) in a moist site that receives full sun or partial shade.

Many perennial vegetable lists include "Good King Henry" (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*). I love the name! It's listed as growing down to zone 4 or 3. Apparently, it looks like a perennial spinach but is from a different genus. According to restorationseeds.com it is not as sweet as regular spinach, is not bitter, and the spring shoots last up to three months in the garden. It's a relative of the annual lambsquarters (*Chenopodium album*), often promoted as wild spinach. I'm not a fan! What I grew had small leaves that were not tender or nearly as tasty as regular spinach. I probably won't try them.

Three plants classified as perennials but usually grown as annuals include kale, garlic, and radicchio. One year I bought some wonderful kale at the Alamosa Community Greenhouse sale in May and it came back up in early spring before I tilled that part of the garden. I'm considering planting some kale, scarlet runner beans, and radicchio in a particular part of the garden that I won't dig up in early spring and see if anything returns.

Another idea might be to try perennial broccoli or spinach. Visit the Better Homes and Garden website (bhg.com) to find out what species might be appropriate. Search for perennial-vegetable-garden-plants. They list some specific varieties.

"Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them. A garden is a grand teacher. It teaches patience and careful watchfulness; it teaches industry and thrift; above all it teaches entire trust." Gertrude Jekyll