



In Spite of Snow:

Winter Vegetables Grow in Brookland

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ERIKA PACKARD

In the chill of January, ripe with the possibility of snow and ice, few gardeners have the luxury of harvesting fresh vegetables from their own yards. For some, the winter season is a welcome respite from the long, light days of summer spent watering, weeding, and fending off garden pests. And yet for other gardeners, who aren't deterred by the shortened daylight hours or the occasional need to tuck cold-weather crops under protective coverings, the winter harvest is just as rewarding as the summer's.

Brian Christin, who lives with his wife, Deirdre, on Lawrence Street in Brookland, is a passionate advocate for winter vegetable gardening and feels it's something every gardener can undertake.

"DC is on the same latitude as southern Italy," he says. "So if they can grow year-round, we should be able to as well."

This year marks Christin's first attempt at a winter garden, which

includes brassicas such as broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, cabbage and mustard, as well as greens such as spinach, cress, arugula and chard.

For gardeners thinking of starting a winter garden, Christin has a few pieces of advice. Site selection is the one aspect of winter gardening that is most crucial to its success, he says, and he offers a novel approach to finding the ideal spot.

"Stand in your yard, and imagine you're waiting for a bus on a windy winter day," advises Christin. "Where would you stand? Probably up against a wall in the sun."

Areas protected by walls, with a southern exposure to take full advantage of winter's shorter daylight hours, are ideal. Also, ground that slopes slightly from north to south is good, Christin says. "Cold air runs like water, so you wouldn't want your garden in a valley where [cold air] would pool."

If your chosen site lacks windbreaks already in place, it's easy enough to build low rock walls, as Christin did, to give plants some protection. Scrap rocks gathered from the yard will work,



as will old construction materials such as concrete block and foundation stone.

Christin started his winter garden from both transplants and seeds. When he first set out the young plants, in mid-September, he was alarmed to see they didn't take off immediately. His concerns were allayed once the temperature started dropping and the plants responded with vigorous growth.

Maintenance of the winter garden is much easier than with a summer garden, says Christin. There are fewer insects in the cold months, and the lower temperatures mean plants require less water.

In general, winter vegetables seem quite content with a minimum of care. Christin carefully selected his garden site and uses stone walls to retain and radiate solar heat. He also gives his

plants extra protection on particularly cold nights by covering them with old bed sheets stretched over cold frames.

Though this is Christin's first try at winter gardening, he's going to make a serious attempt to harvest straight through spring. And come February, or so, he plans to start some spring plants under the protection of his cold frames to give them a head start on the growing season.

Gardening in general has opened Christin's eyes to what vegetables are actually in season locally at certain times of the year, which is an education that serves him well at DC-area farmer's markets. Sometimes, he says, he'll see produce at these markets that he knows from his gardening experience couldn't possibly be in season locally - red flags that these sellers are hawking "local" vegetables imported from places such as California.

Duplicitous vendors aside, the "eat local" movement is gaining momentum in many communities. Eating food that is produced near where you live not only supports the lo-

cal farmers, businesses and economy, but it also reduces the carbon dioxide emissions, fossil fuel use, and packing materials associated with transporting food across the country and around the world.

In addition, local food is generally fresher, and the reduced time from field to table translates to naturally ripened produce that retains more vitamins and minerals. The Christins are proof that in DC, one can eat locally year-round, for it doesn't get much more local than their garden, steps away from their back porch.

Regardless of social and agricultural movements, the Christins agree that the best reason to have a winter garden is that there's no substitute for the flavor of home-grown vegetables. "Because I hate to throw out anything I've grown, we're constantly looking for ways to incorporate my vegetables into meals," says Christin. "The garden has altered the way we eat, in a good way."

Recommended resources

Christin recommends the

following local gardening resources: the Maryland Cooperative Extension at <http://extension.umd.edu>; and Meyer Seed Company, in Baltimore, Md., at www.meyersseed.com or 410-342-4224. Christin finds their staff particularly knowledgeable about what grows well in the DC area.

Christin has also taken part in the work share program at Clagett Farm in Upper Marlboro, Md. This community supported agriculture program allows volunteers to exchange manual labor for a share of the farm's crop, which include fruits and vegetables. For more information, visit www.clagettfarm.org, or call 301-627-4662.

A classic reference book on winter gardening is Eliot Coleman's "Four-Season Harvest: Organic Vegetables from Your Home Garden All Year Long" (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1999), and a primer on the local food movement is Brian Halweil's "Eat Here: Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket" (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004). ■



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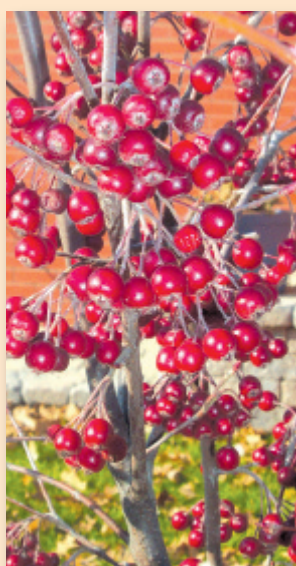
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Malus Crabapple

Profile and pictures
by Derek Thomas



There are around thirty species of crabapples growing in native habitats from Europe, Asia and North America. There are also hundreds of garden varieties of these highly popular trees.

Crabapples are best known for their beautiful pink and white blooms in spring. These trees also offer beautiful winterberries, and picturesque growth with maturity. Their dark brown, flaky bark and lovely growth pattern can look spooky on a gray winter evening. However, their hanging berries are wonderful, plump and highly ornamental.

Crabapples can adapt to many landscape situations and are good performers in a variety of conditions. There are newer varieties that are resistant to many of the

diseases that once plagued older varieties. Two good choices for our area are Sugar Tyme and Red Jewel. Both have glossy bright red fruit in shiny clusters along each stem. The fruit will often persist into the winter. They are stunning on a clear winters day when they sparkle and shine under the sun's glow. Callaway and Centurion are also notable varieties. Crabapples prefer moist, well-drained soil and full sun. They are very tolerant of pollution, poor soils and temperature extremes.

Master Gardener Derek Thomas is principle landscape designer at Thomas Landscapes and Maintenance. He can be reached at 310-642-5182 or www.thomaslandscapes.com. ■