

Permanently productive

Some of the finest of flavours that can be produced at home are offered by perennial vegetables, most of which are both easy to grow and productive. **Charles Dowding** sinks his teeth into some of the best. Photography by Tim Sandall

GROWING PERENNIAL vegetables sounds easier than cultivating soil and sowing new seeds every year, but is it? Britain's three native vegetables – seakale, samphire and watercress (opinion remains divided on whether wild cabbage is native or introduced) are all perennial, but none of them are, or were, commonly grown in gardens. They were eaten more in the past, when foraging or collecting food from the wild was common. Globe artichokes were popular for about 300 years after 1600, but then almost disappeared from British cooking. Asparagus is more common in Europe, so now the most widely-grown perennial vegetable in Britain is rhubarb, usually treated as a fruit.

Space and time

Perennial vegetables have their advantages and disadvantages (see box, right). As with the majority of vegetables, most like deep, rich but well-drained soils and full sun. Overall, the balance between annual and perennial veg you grow depends on what kind of garden you want, how much time you have at certain periods of the year, the space you have available – and what you like the taste of. In my own no-dig, weed-free garden, annual vegetables are not much more work to grow than perennials, and offer me more flexibility.

Where some perennial vegetables

really score is in the timing of their crops – seakale, asparagus and rhubarb are spring crops (even earlier if forced), when annuals are barely ready to plant out. These and artichokes are real 'gourmet' vegetables with complex flavours all of their own and are grown as much for taste as for yield.

One of the most time-consuming jobs in vegetable growing is picking, which applies both to annuals and perennials. Given most need a fair amount of space, I suggest perennials are worth growing in smaller plots only if you are happy to forego the wider range of annual vegetables, or if a high population of slugs makes for regular failure with annual crops. The yield of most perennial vegetables compares favourably with annual types, with the exception of asparagus and seakale.

Many perennial vegetables can be grown successfully in company with other permanent, productive plants such as fruiting shrubs and even trees in a forest garden or permaculture system, but it takes practice and skill to give plants the right balance of light and moisture.

Cardoons, artichokes, seakale and rhubarb are attractive enough to grow in potagers or even ornamental gardens, and will still give a crop, but yields will be higher when they are given plenty of space in a dedicated vegetable garden.

Perennial veg to grow

Some of the most popular perennial vegetables are profiled on the following pages, but there are others worth trying:

● **Cardoon** *Cynara cardunculus*, the wild parent of globe artichoke, can top 2m (6½ft) and is usually grown as an ornamental. It offers both buds and stems to eat. The former must be picked young, before spines develop. The latter require blanching, like celery, by ►243

ADVANTAGES

- 1 Perennial vegetable crops save the recurring work of resowing and replanting.
- 2 They need less maintenance, often outgrowing weeds and with few disease problems.
- 3 Many crop early, in the 'hungry gap' before annual vegetables can be harvested.
- 4 Once established, their vigorous spring growth is often strong enough to resist slugs whereas annual veg seedlings are vulnerable.
- 5 They can be grown as part of a forest garden with a diversity of productive perennial plants (which can lead to higher productivity from a given area).

DISADVANTAGES

- 1 'Perennial' does not mean immortal – periodic replanting helps maintain yields.
- 2 Low-maintenance is not no-maintenance – weeding, watering and clearing old growth after cropping or at season's end are still needed.
- 3 There is an imbalance of harvests through the year; most production is in spring. Perennials are complementary to, not replacements for, annual vegetables.
- 4 Most need space and develop extensive root systems which may compete with nearby plants.
- 5 Perennial vegetables do not represent a complete diet, with more producing leaves than fruits or roots.

Globe artichokes

Cynara cardunculus Scolymus Group. Given full sunlight and enough moisture, these noble plants of the thistle family can survive a decade or more. Height and spread are up to 90cm (3ft) so they do need space but are attractive plants, if not the hardiest (so may be unsuitable for some northern gardens). In mild winters, leaves survive and feed a crop of buds in late May and June, while frosty winters make plants 'disappear' above ground, reappearing in April and cropping through July.

Harvest flowerheads just before they open (main picture). After harvest, twist out or cut off the old stems and a smaller second harvest will often be ready by September. Plants can be grown from seed or from rooted offsets.

'THE YIELD OF MOST PERENNIAL VEGETABLES COMPARES FAVOURABLY WITH ANNUAL TYPES'

Rhubarb

A quintessentially British vegetable enjoying a renaissance in popularity, *Rheum x hybridum* selections prefer damp, humus-rich soil. An initial heavy application of organic matter is repaid in fat stems, usually from the second spring after planting a division from a large, older plant. Alternatively, rhubarb can be grown from seed in spring, for a first pick the following year. 'Timperley Early' gives stems in March and April when few other fresh vegetables are to be found. 'Forcing' stems by blanching them under an upturned pot, bucket or forcing jar makes stems paler and sweeter, but weakens plant roots. Stop picking in early July to allow late-season leaves to replenish the root system.

Seakale

Crambe maritima, like asparagus, is a luxury vegetable but well worth growing for its unique flavour. A rare seaside native reaching 60cm (2ft) tall and 90cm (3ft) across, it needs sharp drainage. Seed is more easily found than plants but propagating from root division ('thongs', from specialist suppliers) is quicker. Space 30–45cm (12–18in) apart; slugs and pigeons enjoy the tender new leaves. Two years after sowing plants should be strong enough to allow shoots to be forced, like rhubarb, under buckets or pots. Cut stems when around 20cm (8in) tall, which takes several weeks. After harvest, plants must be allowed to recover with normal growth of the attractive, grey-green leaves.

Jerusalem artichokes

Helianthus tuberosus is a relative of annual sunflower and is also from North America. Although grown as an annual root crop like potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes are fully hardy. The tubers' durability, together with plants' vigour and near-immunity to disease, means they are treated as perennial. Plant the hen's-egg-sized tubers 30cm (12in) apart and 15cm (6in) deep in spring, cutting larger tubers into pieces. Stems can reach 3m (10ft) and can be used as a windbreak or hedge but may need staking. Earthing-up by 15cm (6in) when shoots are 30cm (12in) tall helps stability. Tubers taste somewhat like globe artichokes; harvest from Nov–Apr and prepare as for potatoes.

Chinese artichokes

A Chinese member of the sage family looking not unlike mint, *Stachys affinis* has been grown there for its small edible tubers, 8cm (3in) long and 2cm (¾in) across, for many centuries. Often pickled, it was not introduced to the West until 1882. Plant tubers in early spring in rich but ideally well-drained sandy soil, 15cm (6in) apart and 7.5cm (3in) deep. Plants reach 45cm (18in) and tolerate partial shade. Harvest when frost has killed off the top growth. Thin and ridged, they are time-consuming to clean and are best dug just before use (they will keep fresh in the soil). Boil for five to ten minutes. The flavour is artichoke-like but nuttier.

Asparagus

Asparagus officinalis is easy to grow on the right soil – well-drained but nutrient- and moisture-rich. On heavy soils, grow in raised beds. Pick from late April to late June in Britain, after which it should be allowed to grow to feed its roots. Often grown on ridges, I find it easier on flat ground, from 'crowns' (one-year-old roots) planted in March to early April, about 60cm (2ft) apart. Feed annually with 3–5cm (1–2in) of compost or manure mulch. Cut or snap spears off just above ground level from two years after planting when 13–18cm (5–7in) tall. Summer growth or 'ferns' can be 2–3m (6–10ft) tall so needs support with string or wires. Cut foliage down in winter. Plants should crop for at least a decade once established.

gathering the leaves together and excluding light with black plastic or cardboard in late summer for two or three weeks. Steam or boil the midribs.

● **Chicory** *Cichorium intybus* can be treated as perennial and some bitter leaves can be gathered early or late in the season, after any hearting rosette has been cut. It can reach 60cm (2ft).

● **Perennial kale** *Brassica oleracea* var. *ramosa*, also known as branching bush kale or thousand head kale, is close to wild cabbage. Best propagated from root cuttings (hard to find) or seed, plant 45–60cm (18–24in) apart. It grows up to 1m (39in) tall and offers many leaves in autumn and spring. Younger foliage has the best flavour. Most brassica pests will attack perennial kale but it resists them better than more highly-bred brassicas. It is also famously hardy.

● **Sea beet** *Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima* is the wild forerunner of beetroot and chard. Native to shingly coastal areas, it is also known as perpetual spinach, and is reliably hardy. Growing to 1.2m (4ft), sea beet is much less prone to bolting than cultivated types. Seed can be sourced from wildflower specialists.

● **Sorrel** *Rumex acetosa* (broad-leaved sorrel) offers leaves of lemony acidity. Growing up to 1.2m (4ft), leaves are best quality in spring when smaller. In moist soil it crops steadily all season long. *Rumex scutatus* (French or buckler-leaved sorrel) grows up to 45cm (18in) with an even more intense flavour.

● **Watercress** *Nasturtium officinale* grows best in running water but can be tried in moist soil. Its leaves do not resist frost; land cress (*Barbarea verna*) is a hardier, if short-lived (biennial) perennial alternative that can be cropped in winter.

● **Wild rocket** *Diplotaxis tenuifolia* will establish as a perennial. Leaves are more indented than those of salad rocket (*Eruca vesicaria* subsp. *sativa*) and more peppery, up to 10cm (4in) long. Wild rocket makes a good cut-and-come-again salad crop but is prone to all the usual brassica pests, and cabbage root fly can affect the vigour of perennial plants.

These UK-grown crops are drawn from a wide range of plant families and have but one thing in common: they are potentially perennial. All other qualities

from eventual size, durability, taste, yield and season of cropping are variable. Their output ranges from carefree bounty to gourmet luxury – some are difficult to find in the shops and often expensive when they are stocked. So if you like the idea of harvesting food from plants that just keep on growing, decide carefully on those best suited to your garden and needs. There is no shortage of possibilities. ■

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i For more on perennial vegetables, visit www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown and, for more alternative edibles, Plants For A Future's website, www.pfaf.org

HOSTA SUSHI

Young hosta shoots are a good mild-tasting spinach alternative in spring. *Hostakopita* is a Greek spinach pie made with hosta shoots; in Japan, *nori maki sushi* is filled with parboiled hosta shoots marinated in soy sauce, salt and sugar (below right). Young shoots can be gathered, skinned and boiled or steamed like asparagus. Larger species and cultivars, such as *Hosta sieboldiana*, are best. In Japan, hosta petioles or *urui* are enjoyed but become increasingly bitter as they mature. The shoots of *Typha* (reed mace) are also edible, tasting similar to water chestnuts. **Stephen Barstow**

