



Above: Watercolour of *Magnolia officinalis* by Caroline Maria Applebee (c1799), held by the RHS Lindley Library.

# Vegetables of the perennial persuasion

The Garden columnist Lia Leendertz on the benefit of growing perennial crops

This summer, will you be clearing the borders in your garden to make way for annual bedding plants? Will you gaze out at beds bare of growth with a satisfied sigh? Perhaps you're enjoying nursing every *Impatiens* and *Nicotiana* through frosts and cold, before planting them out in rows while young, sappy and vulnerable.

While some may nod their heads in agreement (and of course, all breeds of gardener meet under the big RHS umbrella), I would guess most people may be horrified by the idea. All that work – why would you put yourself through it, when perennials almost look after themselves by comparison?

And yet, this is precisely what we do on allotments and in vegetable patches. Every year, without fail, we clear the ground and start all over again from scratch. I do it myself. We use whatever tricks we can – heated propagators, glasshouses, cold

frames, cloches – to push the season as far back as we can, to get earlier crops than spring sowing easily allows, and to give plants enough time to crop before the weather closes in and brings it all to an end. We just think it is what we have to do to produce edible crops.

It is slightly galling to learn that this dependence on annuals is actually an agricultural hangover, and that our particular brand of annual-dominated agriculture is down to a historical fork in the road. Essentially, we can blame horses. Eric Toensmeier, in his 2007 book *Perennial Vegetables*, writes that the Old World had access to draught animals to pull ploughs, and so we leaned towards quick-cropping plants suited

to being ripped out of the ground at the end of every season, and resown at the beginning of the next.

In the New World and the tropics, by contrast, there were no domesticated draught animals, so farmers concentrated on perennial crops that could be worked using hand tools.

It is true that the tropics are richer in perennial raw material, but Eric points out that we have deliberately 'annualised' some of our perennial crops – such as brassicas and beets – to fit in with our annual ploughing fixation.

So, here we are on our allotments and vegetable beds applying a high-maintenance habit passed down to us by our farming

forebears, and yet without so much as a single domesticated draught animal within harnessing distance. It's time to take our lead from the tropics and fill our vegetable gardens with perennials.

We do not have the same multitude

of plants to choose from as gardeners in the tropics, but those that we do have – asparagus, rhubarb, sorrel, artichokes (globe and Jerusalem), sea kale, garlic cress – are at the luxury, expensive-to-buy end of the cropping scale. There is also a growing interest among the more adventurous gardeners out there in

more obscure perennial vegetables, such as kai lan, Babington leeks and Egyptian onions. That can only lead to these crops being more widely-grown and shared, and to being bred and selected into better vegetables. This has happened with their tropical equivalents over hundreds of years.

There are other reasons to turn towards the perennial: a perennial plant takes time to get established, but once it has it is more robust than any annual, and less prey to the whims of our increasingly temperamental climate. A garden filled with perennials is a rugged garden that will not get washed away by heavy rain, or require endless watering during a drought.

It's a logical step. My own allotment is slowly being colonised by fruit bushes, Jerusalem artichokes, rhubarb, sorrel and vines, and I am on the lookout for more. Call it laziness if you like, but I like having areas that no longer need to be stripped clean and dug over every year. I like my easy-to-tend, yet indulgent crops. Maybe one day the idea of an annually cultivated vegetable plot will seem as ridiculous to us as a garden full of nothing but petunias does now. ●

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