



Garden Tips

Highlights from the Veggie Garden

It is cool, windy and rainy outside, the perfect time for me to sit down with the new seed catalogs piling up on my desk. So many wonderful vegetables are on the market, each description better than the last, making it difficult to resist the urge to buy one of each. I love to try new things each year but what I usually begin with are those that performed best the previous and that caught the attention and imagination of our visitors.

The four plants topping the list this past season in Yew Dell's vegetable garden were bronze fennel, (*Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum' or 'Nigra'), artichoke, (*Cynara scolymus*) Bright Lights Swiss Chard (*Spinacia oleracea*), and Musque de Provence pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo* – or is it *maxima*?). Bronze Fennel is a tall, airy plant that makes an excellent licorice-flavored seasoning for fish and bread. Fennel reseeds itself fairly vigorously so to keep it in bounds you may want to consider cutting it back before it sets seed. Fennel is also an excellent food source for monarch butterfly caterpillars.

Our artichoke plants were show stoppers this year. Artichoke is a biennial, meaning it develops large, deeply lobed, soft grey leaves the first year and flowers the second. In this part of the country, it is usually grown as an annual because it rarely survives Kentucky winters. Surprisingly, our plants survived the winter (2010/11) and produced an abundance of spectacular artichokes this summer. The artichoke is actually a flower bud and if you are growing it to eat them remember to harvest the bud while it is still tight. Give the plants plenty of space as the typical plant is 2-3' tall and just as wide. I wouldn't hesitate to grow the plant for its foliage alone – almost everyone who walked by and saw the plant had to stop and ask what it was – it really is that beautiful. Another conversation piece was Bright Lights Swiss Chard. We planted in early spring and as I write this in mid- December we continue to harvest. Bright Lights are a flashy mix of stem colors from a vibrant yellow, to a deep red wine, and even a pale pink. Lightly sautéed in olive oil with a dash of salt and pepper and within minutes you have a beautiful, delicious, and nutritious meal. As with the artichokes, you don't have to eat the chard to appreciate it.

This leads us to our final vegetable and perhaps my favorite – the Musque De Provence Pumpkin. Abundant and deeply ribbed pumpkins were such a perfect buff orange color that many people stopped to ask if they were real. Traditionally sliced and eaten fresh, its sweet meat can also be roasted, baked, or made into a soup. Beautiful, bountiful, and delectable – now that is a tough one to beat!

In addition to the Fab Four mentioned above, there were several other stellar performances that can't go without mentioning. Two of these were greens that stood out in the crowd and have become favorites of mine. The first is Green Wave Mustard (*Brassica juncea* 'Green Wave'). If you love wasabi, you will love adding this one to your salad or eating it straight from the garden. Perhaps 'Green Wave' should have been called Rogue Wave because when eaten fresh the heat hits hard and fast and then is gone. I enjoy surprises and this mustard didn't let me down.

Another green that earns high marks in my book is Dwarf Blue Vates Kale (*Brassica oleracea* 'Dwarf Blue Vates'). Not only is this kale extremely cold hardy but it marches along happily in the heat of summer. In a single 6' x 4' planting area, harvesting only the largest leaves provided me with four to five pounds of greens each week from late spring through the fall. If I had planted a late summer batch, I could have enjoyed the

greens all winter long as well. Some say that kale reaches its mildest flavor right after a frost but 'Dwarf Blue Vates' never became bitter and had an excellent flavor throughout its extended growing season.

One of the more flavorful pole beans I have grown as well as one of the most beautiful was Rattlesnake (*Phaseolus vulgaris* 'Rattlesnake'). The red streaked pods remained sweet and crisp even if I didn't have the opportunity to harvest them as soon as I would have liked. The vines grow vigorously so make sure you have enough support for them.

This last plant is grown primarily as an ornamental and while it is a member of the bean family it is poisonous during certain growth stages. An absolute beauty, the dark burgundy stems, flowers, and pods of Hyacinth-bean (*Dolichos lablab*) were attractive to our visitors, staff, and hummingbirds alike. Another vigorous grower, make sure to have adequate support for this lovely vine to grow on.

You will see some of these beloved plants in our vegetable garden this coming season and for years to come as they have proven they deserve to be there. But be prepared for some vegetables you may have never seen before and that are delightfully fun and awe-inspiring as we transform this space into a Jurassic garden! Bring your friends and family and come see what it feels like to be a Lilliputian in Gulliver's Travels! We can't wait to see you!

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