

To Vichyssoise and Beyond

In part one of this piece I covered the leek basics, at least well enough to get started on growing some in your garden. Now on to companions and cycles for growing a year-round supply of these divine creatures.

Labor-free Leeks

I already mentioned sowing leek seed into lima bean beds during summer where they germinate and grow in the shaded moist micro-climate until first frost. This works in beds of bush limas and I suspect would work just as well with other bush beans. The other half of that growing strategy is to plant lima bean seeds in spring directly into the leek bed. By late spring or early summer my leek bed is snaggle-toothed by random harvesting. (Note: I use a “no-dig” gardening method which allows for these non-traditional planting strategies that will not work if you spade, rototill or row plant your garden.) By July I have a dense bed of lima beans with scattered blooming leeks – no drain on bean production since by then I am only growing leek seed for next year and the beans don’t seem to mind a bit.

So where do I get my summer leeks? In fall plant a narrow bed of bush peas, or a short fava bean like Sweet Loraine, with space on the east and west and south sides for one or two rows of leek transplants. To make this work they do need to be transplants. Forget about the leeks and enjoy the peas or fava beans through winter. As the legumes complete their cycle and slow down, you should cut them back just below the surface (leave those roots alone!) and sow lettuce seed into the bed. By now you can begin eating the smaller leeks and harvesting young lettuce for salads. When the lettuce gets bitter cut it off just below the surface (leave those roots alone) and plant bush bean seeds and enjoy your summer leeks – make sure to harvest what you want before they bolt.

By now you may have noticed that all you are doing is planting and harvesting neither of which requires a lot of time or labor. But what about adding mulch and fertilizer and all that stuff? The legumes have been fixing nitrogen and adding organic matter to the soil – how much of any plant lives below the surface? Leaving the roots alone lets them rot in place – where they belong and the above ground part of the plant becomes mulch that is slowly integrated into the soil. When you harvest the leeks, trim the roots and tops while in the garden and use that for mulch also. Well I digress – on to the vichyssoise!

A Leek Eater’s Tips

There must be more than vichyssoise, since leeks fed the pyramid builders while natives were digging potatoes on an undiscovered continent and French cuisine was being charred on a stick around the campfire. One of my favorite ways to eat them is hot off the grill – take kindergarten pencil size leeks, trim off the roots and the very tops. Spray them with olive oil and barbeque. The outer leaf layer will char and slip off leaving a delicious fresh cooked leek.

Chop leeks finely and sauté lightly in olive oil before scrambling eggs seasoned with fresh tarragon. When cooking rice, steam whole young leeks on top the last 10 minutes and serve as a companion to herb seasoned rice. Chop leeks of any age and add along with fresh herbs during the last half hour cooking cycle for dried beans. Chop them coarsely and add along with fresh chopped basil when cooking potatoes. Mash and cream the potatoes to taste. Chop young leeks and add them raw to salads and soups. And what about those long green tops? Chop them and add to soups and stews or make your own vegetable stock. There’s nothing sophisticated there – just plain good eats, direct from garden to table!

Beyond the Ordinary

Most American based seed catalogs offer one to a few varieties of leek seeds. Some will distinguish between winter and summer types, but most don’t. If you want a picture of how Europe treats leeks take a look at the catalog for Graines Baumaux French Seed Company (www.graines-baumaux.fr/default.asp - rudimentary French language skills required for navigation). They list 25 varieties including some you will not find anywhere else.

Bulbing leeks? Yes, they are related to garlic, but still able to reproduce by seed (garlic only reproduce vegetatively by bulbs and bulbils). The common one is Elephant Garlic - actually a leek that forms bulbs and is propagated by bulbils like true garlic.

The Portuguese onion is another bulbing leek, also known as Perlzwiebel. The head divides into small, round bulbils resembling pearl onions that range from pearl size to an inch in length. There is one listing in the Seed Savers 2005 Yearbook and one listing at Graines Baumaux French Seed Company.

The Los Mol wild leek is perhaps the least know of the bulbing leeks. It was once widely cultivated in church gardens and is now naturalized throughout Europe (primarily in Spain and the United Kingdom). Some of the naturalized European stands now are being harvested for commercial purposes because of the interest among gardeners. Each bulb divides into four bulbs that sometimes have hard bulbils attached, like elephant garlic. Either the full bulb or the bulbils can be used for propagation. There is one listing in the Seed Savers 2005 Yearbook.

And finally there is the North American wild leek (*Allium tricoccum*), also known as ramps. Although not a bulbing leek it is a wild gourmet plant that can be cultivated in the home garden. Ramps are found from North Carolina to Canada and are collected in the spring starting in the south and moving north. For more information consult Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_leek), and The Ramp Farm (www.rampfarm.com/)

Why not give leeks a try? You can grow them in your salad patch or flower bed, or in borders or even in dedicated beds. In our climate and soils they are a nearly disease free, fool proof, year round veggie for your table or herb in your pot.

The web version of this article is on my website - (www.darrolshillingburg.com/GardenSite/leeks_1.htm)

till next time,

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