



The 'Hungry Gap' Before Summer's Bounty

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Spring gardeners put in a lot of time starting seeds and getting the garden ready, but often there's little on the table to show for it. Daffodils pop up, but where's the salad? Fruit trees bloom, but where's the fruit?

In England, historically, this period was called the "hungry gap," and for those everywhere who depend on what they grow, spring can be a time of painful longing before summer's luxurious bounty. Some have even traced the origin of Lent, the pre-Easter spring fast, to this time of dearth.

Exactly when the gap begins or ends depends on the garden. With a nice full root cellar, you can subsist for a long time on storage crops such as potatoes and beets, even if they are a little spongy. Celery root has sometimes lasted until early summer, for me, and in a good year I've had butternut squash, stored in a cool room, remain edible well into spring. At times I've even managed to close the potato gap and the carrot gap by refrigerating some of the last ones until the first earlies are dug in the unheated greenhouse.

Greens are even easier. We have mâche and spinach growing abundantly in the greenhouse now, with new crops of both, sown in late fall, soon to take their place. If you have a cold frame, try sowing some of these, plus lettuce and arugula, right now. You'll have spring salads before you know it.

This is the time to prowl around and see what greens have overwintered right in the garden. Late-fall greens may have looked battered and unappetizing after this year's snow, but if the roots are still intact you may have Swiss chard, kale and beet greens sprouting anew. Sorrel, which is perennial, will soon be abundant, along with fresh herbs. Parsnips, which overwinter in the ground, are there for the digging. And while you're rejoicing in those, sow your peas, lettuce and scallions as soon as the ground is dry enough to be worked.

In short, if you grow vegetables with a little forethought, spring is not a hungry time. The saddest old stories are about those who depended on grains for survival. For them the hungry gap came in midsummer before the wheat, barley or rye had been cut. Nothing separated rich from poor like the difference between having plenty of grain in your larder from the previous year and having run out.

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