



Parsnips Shine Brightest on their Own

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A parsnip is like a pasty-faced, overweight carrot, ancient and unrefined. The difference is hardly one of pedigree: The carrot began as the skinny white root of the Queen Anne's lace plant, not much use until breeders brought it to its crunchy, candy-colored, tangerine-flake glory.

All they did to the parsnip was fatten it up. It's still the same earthy root fed to cows on the Isle of Guernsey, remarkably nutritious but long ago dethroned as Europe's major starchy root by the New World potato.

Nevertheless, nothing else does what the parsnip does: rest in the ground all winter with no need for root cellar storage. After a few fall frosts it develops a sweetness that no carrot has ever bested, and it sustains that all the way into mid-spring. You can dig it any time the ground is not frozen, but it is most treasured as the earliest fresh harvest of the year.

The flavor of a parsnip is not delicate. To my palate it is both too strong and too sweet to enhance the stewpot. But it shines as a separate dish, taking the same role as that of a sweet potato: a foil for fatty meats. When roasted or sauteed, its sugars caramelize richly and are well complemented by seasonings such as orange zest, tarragon, rosemary, cumin or nutmeg.

It pairs well with onions, shallots, leeks and garlic, or its old cousin the carrot. Parsnips and carrots pureed together with cream make a side dish that goes with anything. And a historic partnership underlies the old saying "Fine words butter no parsnips." Butter mellows them out.

Ordinarily, parsnips are seed-sown in early spring, in a spot they will occupy for a year or more. But if your mouth is at this moment watering, it is not too late to sow a row. You will need fresh seed, and a patch of what I call "carrot soil": deeply dug, stone-free, well lightened with organic matter and finely pulverized, especially in the top inch where the seeds will sprout. You will have to keep the surface consistently moist until they germinate. This will help prevent an impenetrable crust from forming, but if a clay crust is your garden's trademark, you might try the old trick of sowing a crust-breaking nurse crop of radishes alongside.

If last spring's foresight has already won you a parsnip crop, try this 17th-century recipe from Sir Kenelm Digbie for a simple parsnip pudding. Grate the parsnips and stew the result in milk, adding more milk from time to time "till it hath drunk in a good quantity of the Milk, and is well swelled with it, and will take in no more."

Eat the parsnips, Digbie urges, "without Sugar or Butter, for they will have a natural sweetness that is beyond Sugar, and will be Unctuous so as not to need Butter." He was right about the sugar, but a knob of butter would be beyond sublime.

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