

Cynthia Brian's Digging Deep

Pass the mustard!

"In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy." – William Blake



After the rains, lawns are lush, thick and emerald green.

Photos Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian

The thunder clapped. The lightning bolted.
The skies opened.

Rain, life-giving rain.

The garden rejoices.

The lawn, browned from the hot summer and autumn, is once again a lush verdant emerald. Fresh new leaves are beginning to unfurl on plants presumed expired. Weeds are sprouting in every crevice and worms are back working their tilling magic. Tiny pink buds are exploding on peach trees, white blossoms already cover the flowering pears, and scarlet blooms of Chinese flowering quince, a member of the rose family highlight the barren landscape. We are smack in the middle of winter with the opportunity to learn, teach and enjoy.

As you drive along the local roads, you'll witness fields carpeted in yellow. This is the

wild mustard plant, the magical staple of my childhood. Every year in February and March our walnut orchards would be blanketed in 5-foot-tall plants that provided my siblings and me abundant opportunities to build forts, hide from our parents, and make mustard leaf sandwiches. We'd collect the seeds, mix them with vinegar and sea salt, and make our own culinary creations. Our dad would eventually till this beneficial cover crop back into the soil as a green manure to add nitrogen, increase drainage, and water retention.

If you planted seeds of edible greens and cool loving crops in the fall, you are now harvesting many members of the mustard family including cabbage, kale, collards, kohlrabi, broccoli, yellow mustard, bok choy and cauliflower. Buds of Brussels sprouts are forming their "sprouts" in the axils of leaves on the stalk. Flavor improves with Brussels sprouts after two or more frosty nights. The mustard

family includes the genus Brassica whereby most of the leaves and flowers taste peppery. Since the flower pattern is in the form of a cross, the plants are referred to as cruciferous. Called superfoods, cruciferous vegetables pack a punch with disease-fighting phytochemicals, attributed to preventing cancers and cardiovascular diseases. Brassicas are also nutrient and fiber-rich with healthy plant omega-3s, vitamin A, C, E, B-1 and folic acid. They are easy to grow from seed in well-drained, fertile soil enriched with compost. Because Brassicas are prone to pests and soil-borne diseases, make sure to practice crop rotation and never compost the roots. Although you can use recycled containers to start seeds indoors in the winter, these plant varieties are more successful when seeds are sown directly in the garden.

With the recent outbreaks of E. coli infections found in a variety of leafy greens and specifically romaine lettuce, growing your own vegetables is not only less expensive, but safer because you have the power to control what goes into your soil. Seeds of arugula, Swiss chard, lettuces, spinach, scallions, sorrel, fennel, and nasturtium can be succession scattered to ensure year-round eating pleasure.

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Once you get arugula started, you'll have plenty all season.