

Perennial Vegetables

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener (published 2025-02-01)

I was looking around the internet for ideas for articles and found something that really grabbed my attention. A Master Gardener group in Pennsylvania, my home state, had lists of articles galore. One was about perennial vegetables. I thought, okay, asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*), ramps (*Allium tricoccum*) and rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbarum*). Well, the list of vegetables was long, and my jaw dropped to the floor. So, here we go with some plants. They all grow well in our area although you may need to search for seeds or plants. Details of almost all these plants can be found by typing in the scientific name at the North Carolina Extension site:

https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find_a_plant/ and for those that are not found there, a link to additional information is provided with the plant paragraph below.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are decorative and delicious. The stems are usually used but the flowers are edible, too. Divide the bulbs and replant for continued growth. You might want to keep these in a container or segregated area to prevent excessive spreading. They will regrow from bulbs left in the ground, so leave some for the next year.

Horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*) is a tangy root vegetable that I love mixed in mayonnaise for topping beef or combined with grated beets, sugar and vinegar to accompany ham. It is a cool summer or fall plant and the vibrant green leaves can grow up to 5 feet tall. Dig up the root and separate side roots for replanting. It also spreads by roots and spreads aggressively if not kept in check.

Walking onion (*Allium x proliferum*), aka Egyptian walking onion or tree onion, is too cool not to plant. It has bulbils, bulb-like growths at the tops of the stems, which fall over and replant themselves. That's how they walk around your garden. The bulbils and stems are edible. The underground bulb is pretty hot but is still considered edible if you dare. More information is available at: <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/egyptian-walking-onions/>.

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) is similar to parsley. The leaves, stems and seeds are all edible and commonly used in soups, stews, salads and bread. It can grow to 5 feet tall. You can propagate with seeds, but it will return each year from the roots. Detailed information is available at: <https://www.gardenia.net/plant/levisticum-officinale>.

This one really blew my mind: perennial peas (*Lathyrus latifolius*)! Never would I ever dream that there is a variety of peas that survive and thrive year after year. This climbing vine has gorgeous flowers that last all summer. Even better, it is deer resistant! Unfortunately, according to two resources, the peas are not edible. <https://www.gardenia.net/plant/lathyrus-latifolius-perennial-sweet-pea>.

Good King Henry (*Blitum bonus-henricus*) is a perennial green whose leaves are used like spinach and its stems can be cooked like asparagus. It can be started from seeds that have been cold-stratified and planted 4 weeks before the last frost. It will grow back each year from the roots. Flowers, leaves, shoots, and seeds are all edible. Harvest leaves in spring and early summer. Cut back to the ground in summer for regrowth in fall. See:

<https://permapeople.org/plants/blitum-bonus-henricus-good-king-henry> for additional information.

Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) is not from Jerusalem, nor is it an artichoke. It is in the sunflower family and can be grown as a root crop. Enjoy the nutty taste by boiling, mashing, roasting or eating it raw. Harvest the tuber 2 weeks after the flowers fade in fall. The plant can grow up to 10 feet tall and has the potential to spread aggressively by seed and rhizomes. For more details, see: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/helianthus-tuberosus/>.

Perennial vegetables can make gardening a little easier by providing produce for years with just an initial planting. The unique nature of these plants in appearance and taste is a great reason for trying them, too. Who doesn't want to tell their friends about their Egyptian walking onion or Good King Henry spinach?

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County's YouTube site:
<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.