

Over the Backyard Fence: Answers to your questions about food

Just as we share recipes and answers to thorny questions with neighbours over the actual or metaphorical backyard fence, members from our local food system supply answers to questions you might have on everything from cold storage to balcony gardening.

Make Preserving a Social Activity

Q: I am struggling with preserving. Can you give me some advice?

Stacey Corcoran-McLaren responds: The most important lesson I've learned about canning is that it is more fun done collectively.

I only began canning a year ago myself. I had a massive amount of tomatoes overflowing in my garden and was trying to think of ways to use them up. I had watched my Mom make salsa before so that was where I started, but it barely made a dent in my pile of tomatoes! I found a tomato sauce recipe that was not so different from my salsa, then tried canned/stewed tomatoes, and slowly worked through my tomato harvest. Emboldened by my success, I moved to canned peaches and pears thinking they may fulfill my fruit cravings in the dead of winter.

Then two of my good friends suggested we have a canning party where as a group we contributed

ingredients and then shared the fruits of our labour. We tried things I would never have tried on my own and had copious amounts of fun chopping, chatting and sharing knowledge. Out of our trio, only one had much previous canning experience and us other two "newbies" felt much more comfortable with our more experienced friend there to answer questions and guide us.

That led me to realize canning in a social setting is the best way to get started. Not only does it mean the process goes faster because the work is more spread out, but the fun that can be had spending time in a great-smelling kitchen cannot be underestimated! So get your mom, aunt, grandmother or other knowledgeable friend to join you in the kitchen some rainy summer or autumn day and the results, food to eat throughout the winter and perhaps gifts to surprise your loved ones, will surely delight you.

Stacey Corcoran-McLaren lives in downtown Kingston and is halfway through her second year of eating locally.

Getting Local Food at the Market

Q: How am I sure I'm getting local food at the market?

Annie Wilcox responds: When I'm trying to buy food that is local and seasonal, I... Stop, Look and Listen.

I stop at the market as often as I can. I walk around, notice who's there – who's selling what, and what the food looks like.

I look at what's on offer. Is it in season? Can it be grown in southeastern Ontario?

I listen to the seller's answers to my other questions: Did you grow this? If not, do you know who did? How far away is that farm? 5 km? 50

km? 500 km?

Getting to know the people who sell produce in our market is one sure way of finding out about the food they are selling and thus getting local food.

Also, I can now look for the logo *Eat from Kingston's Countryside*, which will identify for me foods produced within 100 km of Kingston. I'm going to ask sellers to start using that logo.

My last question for my market seller? What wonderful food will you be bringing from local growers next week?

Annie Wilcox often spends weekends reading recipe books, buying food, cooking it and then – bliss! – eating it.

Growing Food in the Backyard

Q: What can I do to grow some of my own food in my backyard?

Janette Haase responds: Anyone can grow a significant amount of vegetables for fresh eating in a garden of about 350 to 500 square feet (winter storage vegetables need another 600 to 800 square feet). The easiest way to hand dig a garden is to begin by killing the grass sod. This can be accomplished by covering it with something that will block the sunlight for six to nine weeks – a heavy tarp or old boards works well. The soil should then be turned and a generous amount of vegetable and/or animal compost added.

To maximize growing space, plant intensively in four-foot-wide beds separated by one to one-and-a-half foot walkways. Mulch-

ing with straw helps to conserve moisture and adds organic matter to the soil, however regular watering is essential if nature does not co-operate.

Concentrate on growing vegetables that are relatively productive and that do not require a great deal of space or attention. For fresh eating this includes lettuce, spinach, salad greens, herbs, peas, beans, beets, green onions, Swiss chard, kale, tomatoes, cucumbers and zucchini. Planting small amounts at a time and planting every month from April to September ensures a steady and manageable supply of vegetables. Winter storage vegetables include carrots, leeks, onions, garlic, potatoes, cabbage, turnip and potatoes.

Janette Haase writes about and teaches workshops on backyard organic gardening and eating seasonally.

Getting Into Cold Storage

Q: I want to eat more seasonal, local produce through the winter. I don't have a root cellar, but is there a way for me to use cold storage to keep local produce available in the colder months?

Aric McBay responds: Doing your own cold storage is an excellent way to keep local foods available through the winter. Although this would be a lot easier if you have a root cellar, you can still store a variety of different vegetables without one.

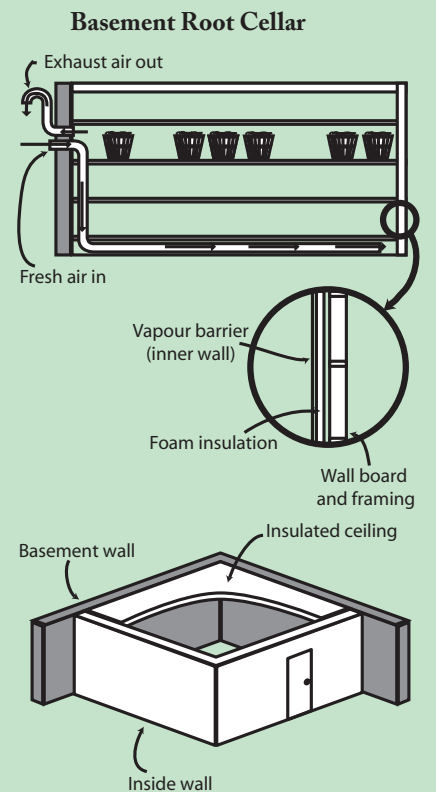
Local carrots, beets, and potatoes make excellent storage vegetables, but you aren't limited to root crops. Hard fruits like apples are commonly stored, and so are winter squashes like butternut and acorn squash.

A root cellar works by keeping the air at the right temperature and humidity to extend the lifespan of the stored vegetables. The exact conditions vary from vegetable to vegetable, but most crops prefer cool (about 7-10 C) and only slightly humid. (Onions and garlic require cool and dry storage, and are even easier to store than most roots.) If you don't have a dedicated root cellar, you may be able to find another place in your home with similar conditions, such as an unfinished basement, a cool closet, or a slightly heated garage.

Some Tips:

- ▶ Make sure that there is some air circulation, and store foods in cardboard or paper rather than plastic bags.
- ▶ Avoid mixing in bananas, which produce a gas – ethylene – that causes premature ripening in some storage vegetables.
- ▶ Use a thermometer and a humidity meter to check the storage conditions.
- ▶ Check your vegetables regularly for spoilage. Remove any suspect items to avoid the spread of spoilage.
- ▶ Wash vegetables right before eating, not before placing in storage.
- ▶ Store whole vegetables. If vegetables have nicks or cuts, eat right away rather than storing.
- ▶ Do not allow vegetables to freeze or come close to freezing, or they will spoil.

If you follow these guidelines, you should be able to keep many local storage crops for weeks or months beyond their harvest. If you want to learn more about cold storage, an excellent book is *Root Cellaring: Natural Cold Storage of Fruits and Vegetables* by Mike and Nancy Bubel. And if you feel brave, building a root cellar in or



near your home can be a rewarding and nourishing experience.

*Aric McBay is a Kingston-area writer who grows his own vegetables and stores them in a home-built root cellar. He wrote about cold storage techniques in his book *Peak Oil Survival*. The image above is an illustration from that book.*

Growing in the City

Q: I don't have a backyard – I live in an apartment. How can I produce some of my own food?

Joey Pittoello and Sarah Smolkin respond: As people living in apartments, we often imagine that our only role in the local food movement is supporting local farmers as a consumer. But with a little creativity, knowledge, time and enthusiasm, we apartment-dwellers can also join the movement as a producer. Here are a few ideas to get started:

- ▶ **Balcony "Gardens":** Planters create the opportunity to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce and herbs for cooking or tea. If you have minimal space try vines (such as tomatoes or cucumbers) that can be encouraged to climb. If you don't have a balcony, with the per-

mission of your landlord, a rooftop garden is an exciting possibility.

- ▶ **Window Boxes:** For those without a balcony try growing in window boxes. Plants in south-facing windows find the greatest amount of sunshine.
- ▶ **Community Garden:** Check in your community to see if there is already a group of people collectively farming a piece of land that you can join. If not, scout out a piece of land to start one. Parks are a very interesting option.
- ▶ **Vermicompost:** Vermicompost is a composting method that uses worms to break down organic matter from your kitchen. Your compost will provide important nutrients to your soil and this method is easy and doesn't smell!
- ▶ **Sprouting Food:** Sprouting dried food, such as legumes, seeds or nuts brings them back to

life. The process of germination increases the vitamin content, produces numerous enzymes that aid digestion and neutralizes enzyme inhibitors and also phytic acid that inhibit our absorption of some minerals.

Although on their own, these methods will not allow us to grow a full-season's worth of food, every little bit is important. You would not only be growing your own fresh and flavourful local food, but also growing an awareness of our collective participation in nature's cycles and a greater appreciation for other farmers and producers.

Joey Pittoello is currently apprenticing on Ravensfield organic farm in Maberly. Sarah Smolkin teaches yoga at Path Yoga and works as a personal counsellor at Queen's University. Together, they have future plans of starting an organic farm.

Too Many Vegetables? Impossible!

Q: I belong to a CSA – community supported agriculture – and so in the summer can get an overabundance of certain vegetables at various periods. I'm not inclined to preserve them. What else can I do?

Rebecca Martin responds: My best advice is: Eat them! Start thinking of veggies as the main part of your meal rather than a side dish or an accompaniment.

A big pot of soup or vegetable chilli is a great way to use all sorts of vegetables and will also

freeze well for another day. One of my favourite things to do with late-summer vegetables is to cut them french-fry style, toss them in olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt and pepper, and roast them. A good blend is eggplant, peppers, carrots, summer squash, onions and garlic – just be sure to take into account their different cooking times and slice them all accordingly (carrots, for example, should be very thin). This dish is good warm, but is also a delicious salad – I recommend a yogurt and goat cheese dressing.

For vegetables that you have an excess of, such as that

giant zucchini, think of ways to disguise it such as cooking and puréeing it as a base for a soup, or baking it into a loaf, muffins or cookies. Beets make a great addition to chocolate cake (be sure they are well puréed) or carrot cake. Don't be shy about putting all kinds of vegetables in all kinds of dishes – they are glorious, after all!

Rebecca Martin was an apprentice with Root Radical CSA for the growing season. She has also been a cook for a small co-operative café at Trent University.