

We enjoyed either the first crop of the season yesterday or the last taste of the previous year. I am not sure which is the proper designation. But, anyway, the parsnips tasted good.

The parsnip is an interesting vegetable, one that is both praised and reviled, but primarily, probably, ignored. Most people don't eat parsnips.

The new interest in eating locally grown, seasonal food has revived interest in roots like parsnips, though, and I suspect that if given a chance, parsnips would become as popular as other vegetables that have not been a staple of the home cook's repertoire until recently.

Eateries specializing in tasty foods of their own areas have discovered parsnips. A recent lunch in our favorite café revealed a parsnip puree soup on the menu. We were bent on consuming our favorite sandwiches that day, so I did not try it, knowing that we would soon be able to eat parsnips at home.

Parsnips look like white carrots, though often bumpier and less refined. But, they taste nothing like carrots. I don't have the words to describe the flavor of these humble roots, but the sweetness and earthiness cannot be compared to any other vegetable.

Parsnips can be annoying in the newly planted garden, however. They come up very slowly, and the germination rate is much lower than most garden seeds. I noticed on the pack we will plant this spring that only 77 percent of the seeds can be expected to grow, while most other seeds' rates are over 90 percent.

So, we plant parsnip seeds more thickly than others and expect to thin if we are lucky and get a good stand. We also sow radish seeds in the same row. They come up quickly, marking the planting, and they can be harvested before the parsnips are more than tiny, green seedlings.

Parsnips can be harvested as soon as the roots are large enough to use, but they are sweeter and more flavorful if left until late fall--or, better yet, until spring. And, there is something satisfying about a crop that lies there under the snow all winter and yet provides such pleasure when we are finally able to hack through the frost or grope in the mud of March and April and dig out the pure white roots.

We had our first parsnips of the season--from the seeds planted nearly a year ago-- yesterday. I peeled them, cooked them with a little salt, and dressed them with our home churned butter. They tasted fresh and delicious, though I enjoyed equally the raw parsnips I ate while I was peeling.

There are better ways to prepare parsnips, but I was in a bit of a rush yesterday. We like them best of all cooked just a little to soften them and then fried in butter until they are brown and their sugars nearly carmelized. We eat most of the parsnips this way.

Roasting vegetables has become very popular in recent years, and parsnips lend themselves well to this preparation, too. Alone or combined with other root vegetables and garlic, they are equally tasty. Then, too, there are the purées, soups, stews, and other dishes that make use of parsnips. In Della Lutes' *The Country Kitchen* memoir, published in the 1930s, she extolls the virtues of parsnips. Her mother's "rule" for making vegetable soup, for instance, is very specific. "...I take onions, potatoes, carrots, celery, in reasonable proportions, but not stinting on the onions, and *one* parsnip...."

Spring is on the way, and it won't be long before those few parsnips that are left in the ground produce green shoots, trying to make a seed-producing second year plant that will allow itself to reproduce. We won't be a party to that, though, and the parsnip bed will be worked up and planted to some other vegetable. But, somewhere in the garden, there will be a bed devoted to this spring favorite, and we will anticipate another crop of these underappreciated roots to enjoy next March.