

Life on the home front has taken a definite positive turn this past week. In spite of all the trouble in the world, the environmental disasters, the political upheaval, the divisions of race, religion, culture, and sexual identification, and with the added trauma of the pandemic, a happy occurrence took place this week. This was not unexpected, but when a little rain was added—like whipped cream on dessert—it has brought smiles to our faces and energy to our steps.

We took up the first new potatoes from the garden this week. This may seem trivial to some people, but to me it is an event of great significance. We have been without potatoes for about two months. We had plenty of spuds all winter long, and we planted more than we can possibly use for the next season, but potatoes just lose their quality along about April or May. They sprout, ready to start new plants for another year, and they seem to lose all their wonderful “potato-ness.” So, in early or mid May, we stop cooking potatoes. Rice, barley, kamut, and homemade noodles take up the slack, but, although all of these “substitutes” taste fine and we enjoy them, we (and particularly, I) am in a kind of mourning until there are new potatoes to cook and eat.

Usually, we eat those first tiny tubers on the 4th of July, but a very hard frost the last of May froze those first early potatoes we had planted. The plants were black right down to the soil. Surprisingly, they recovered, and though they aren’t as big as usual, they provided part of our first meal of new potatoes on July 6th.

“What did you eat with those first potatoes?” someone has asked in previous years.

“Well, nothing! There was nothing to add that would make them taste even better.” To be honest, I did pluck a little dill from the garden, and I think Runo put some butter on his plate, but it was basically just potatoes.

New potatoes are so wonderful to prepare, too. A brisk rubbing takes off most or all of the tender skin, and washed and cooked in fresh cold water with salt added is all that is necessary.

Several years ago my friend Susanne in Dalsland sent me a pair of “potatisvantar.” These are just nubby nylon gloves that make perfect potato scrubbers. I finally wore them out, and now I “make do” with one of the Scotch-Brite green “scrubbies” that I use for rubbing pots and pans. A dedicated scrubby is the potato scrubber now. It isn’t quite as handy as the gloves, but it makes cleaning the little potatoes a lot easier than no aid at all.

And they are little in the beginning. I think that marble size is about as small as is worth the work, and most of them are larger than that, but I would never throw away a potato that I inadvertently loosened from its plant too early.

I don’t pull the plants this time of year. I “steal” from many likely looking plants, the ones that have grown well and are blooming. Later on, we will begin taking a whole hill and digging in the dirt around it. But, robbing many plants works very well this time of year. The only possible disappointment comes when we dig potatoes in the late summer or fall, and we find some plants that have virtually nothing under them. I have stolen all their

production.

We grow several kinds of potatoes. This year, we have Onaway—a “regular” white potato and the one that matures early, so our first new potatoes every year are Onaways. We also have Satina—a yellow potato that is wonderful for mashed potatoes, and that cooks very quickly. Then, there are French Fingerlings—long, slender tubers that are red on the outside and sometimes have a little rosiness inside, as well. There are also classic baking potatoes. The ones we grow are Butte Russet and the old Russet Burbank variety. We also have two kinds of red potatoes. There are Red Maria that seem to take much longer to come up but are good “keepers” and this year, Strawberry Paw. We bought a little seed for them last year and kept all for seed. We will see how they work out. We also have another white potato, the Algonquin. We haven’t had them before, either, so it will be testing time for them, too.

It is no longer hard to decide what to have for dinner. The washed, rubbed-clean new potatoes are in the pan, ready to cook. There is still a bit of asparagus, and there are snap peas. Ground beef is thawed in the refrigerator. But, none of those last dishes matter so much, as long as there are new potatoes.

There is that old senseless question about what one would take to eat on a “desert island” if one could take only one food. It is, of course, a totally illogical question, but, if push came to shove, the food I would like to have with me in any situation is the potato. And now I am thinking about all the different dishes I will make this coming year that are based on potatoes—baked, mashed, *raggmunkar*, *lefse*, potato patties, raw fried, etc. etc. etc.