

“Winter eating” has nearly totally taken over now from the spring, summer, and fall method of just consuming whatever was ready to eat. To eat “seasonally,” in other words, is how we lived from late May through November. Now, in our climate, most of us are relying on either the supermarket or the rewards of our own warm season labor.

I have actually always thought that preparing meals during the “off season” is easier. Having a wide assortment of fresh foods is, of course, a great pleasure. But, now, when I do my “shopping” in the freezers, fruit cellar, and root cellar, a lot of the labor of getting dinner on the table has already been done.

The broccoli has been cut into flowerets, examined for cabbage worms, blanched, and frozen. I think it is very close to being as good as fresh broccoli. And the same can be said for some other vegetables, too. So, it is not nearly as time consuming to cook a meal.

In July, for instance, if I wanted to cook broccoli for dinner, the first step would be to take my garden pail and walk down to the garden. Once there, I would uncover the broccoli bed that had been shielded from cabbage butterflies with floating row cover. Then, I had to look for broccoli that was ready to eat. As long as I had the covering removed, I would pull any weeds that might have come up while protected with row cover. I would take my garden knife that I had retrieved from the greenhouse, cut the broccoli I wanted for dinner, cover the bed again, take the knife back to the greenhouse, and lay it up on the shelf. As long as I was there, I would pull any weeds and perhaps water a few plants that looked like they needed some moisture.

Then, I would walk home, wash the broccoli, cut it up, and have it ready to cook. That took a lot more time and effort than going down the stairs to the basement, opening the freezer, pulling out a bag of broccoli, and coming back up to the kitchen to cook it in boiling, salted water.

The same is true for many vegetables and for fruit, too. It isn’t that it is less work, but that it was done differently. When I picked broccoli to freeze for winter, I had picked as much as was ready to use, and then had blanched and frozen many bags, rather than bringing in just enough for one meal.

That doesn’t mean that I’d rather have frozen broccoli than fresh. There is a great deal of pleasure involved in growing, preparing, and eating garden fresh vegetables, but, when the frosts of fall and snow of winter—plus much shortened daylight hours—signify the end of the growing season, there are compensations. Cooking becomes almost like vacation.

And, it is really fun to “shop” in the basement. In the freezer, I can choose from many vegetables: French filet beans; two kinds of sweet corn plus corn mixed with red and green sweet peppers; multi-colored chard; spinach; snap peas; broccoli; cauliflower; red, yellow, orange, and green sweet peppers; sautéed aubergine; cauliflower; beets; blanched cabbage; red cabbage; and bags of mixed vegetables—all from our own garden.

In the fruit cellar are: pickles; relishes; canned peaches, pears, plums, and applesauce; and several kinds of jams. There are also canned beans; chicken broth; canned pumpkin; squash; tomato products; maple syrup, and

honey. I do my “shopping” every day.

In a corner of the basement are the boxes of garlic. And, I never neglect the root cellar. There we have carrots packed in sand; pails of onions and shallots; and the most important of all the foods we put on our table—potatoes.

If I had to exist on just one food, though that is one of those theoretical situations that doesn't make any sense—the old “stuck on a desert island” story—I would not have to think more than a second—potatoes. And the root cellar has enough for us to eat potatoes every day from now until spring. And, there aren't many days that pass without potatoes appearing in our meals.

So, this is a time of more leisurely meal preparation. Having the basement loaded with food makes cooking easier, faster, and more enjoyable. During the long winter evenings, we have time to peruse those garden seed catalogs—to do what my dad called “winter farming”—and get ready for another garden season.