

Arts & Leisure

Nature's Bounty

By JJ Murphy



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Companion Gardening Values Cultivated and Wild Plants

The land that has provided my vegetables for the last several years will be a living laboratory this year. Master Gardener Betsy Hawes has an amazing plan for maximizing our allocated garden space while adhering to organic farming principles. She has me studying *Great Garden Companions* by Sally Jean Cunningham. I love the idea of including wild flowers, like asters, to attract the beneficial species that eat the destructive species.

Mycology experts recommend planting wine-cap mushrooms (*Stropharia rugosoannulata*) as companions for tomatoes. Betsy is on board with cultivating mushrooms.

If we are successful in encouraging the beneficial species to eat or deter the destructive species, we will not have to apply repellents, even organically-approved ones. And we will not have to spend as much time weeding. There really is a limit to how much chickweed, purslane and lamb's quarters I can eat.

In addition to her gardening efforts, Betsy has been selling tomato plants for the past fifteen years, dedicating half the receipts to the landowners who provide our garden space. Betsy already has several hundred orders for tomatoes. In addition to continuing to dedicate half the receipts, here's what she plans to do with the tomatoes that will be growing on part of our allocated space:

- a row at the top of the garden, or even outside the fence, for visitors (there's a retreat center on this property) to pick a few cherry tomatoes with a sign saying, "Please take a couple of tomatoes."
- a row of tomatoes to "Plant a row for the hungry"; we'll take those to a soup kitchen.
- tomatoes in the garden for administrative and support staff of the retreat center and the grounds.

This seems like a winning plan to me. Of course I am still amazed as I place microscopic seeds in soil (in the warmth of Betsy's home), to think that by summer, each tomato plant will feed large numbers of people.

Any day that is rain and snow free is a garden day. Last week I weeded the asparagus bed, two of the raspberry patches and the Jerusalem artichoke area. The day was partly cloudy with a southerly breeze.

Since the vernal equinox, it has snowed twice. Local farmers know that the danger of frost exists until early-to-mid May in this climate zone. The last blustery days of March going out more like a lion than a lamb, were followed by April Fool's Day snow.

I was out at the farm a week after the last snow-storm. A small patch of snow lined the north-facing side of the greenhouse. It occurred to me that I should put that snow into our rain barrels while I have a perfect spring day to get my work done. Warm enough to work without either freezing or perspiring, a light breeze, robins and cardinals singing, red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures riding the air currents.

The leeks, Jerusalem artichokes and Brussels sprouts wintered over nicely. The spinach planted last fall provides a much-needed taste of fresh greens after a stormy winter. I spent time gathering veggies, knowing more snow is on the way. The chickweed that nestles among the spinach leaves adds a corn flavor to my salad.

Wild garlic adds a zesty tang and I just saw my first trout lilies (*Erythronium albidum*), which is enough to keep me smiling until I find my first mushrooms of the season.

I am grateful for the opportunities Betsy and my foraging mentors provide. It keeps me feeling hopeful in an otherwise absurd world. Nothing beats spending time in the garden with my hands in the earth, except a stroll through the adjacent woods.

Writer and naturalist JJ Murphy offers creative nature curriculum, wild food recipes, fiction, poetry, articles and writing services for individuals, entrepreneurs, small businesses and ecologically aware companies. rffolio at www.WriterByNature.com, Giving Nature a Voice.



Dinner and A Show

Pine Bush High School Senior Citizens' Dinner and Play Night



Recently, nearly 250 of Pine Bush Central School District's senior citizens attended the special annual Senior Citizens' Dinner and Play Night at Pine Bush High School. Held each year to show appreciation for the community's senior citizens, the event is made possible by donations and the help of many volunteers. The dinner and show are offered to the attendees at no cost. After a delicious dinner, the seniors were treated to the High School's spring musical performance, Roald Dahl's *Willy Wonka*.

Photos by Robert Curtis, Ulster BOCES Community Relations