Summer in the Northeast Trial Garden:
by Jay Leshinsky, NE Trial Garden Coordinator

It was certainly the fantastic taste of home garden vegetables and compelling forms and scents of
garden flowers that drew me to my grandparent's garden as a child. Not that I did any work there -
my trips to the garden were solely to smell the flowers and sneak a taste of my favorite vegetables
and fruits before they were harvested by the adults. It wasn't until my college days that I realized
that growing vegetables and flowers could be as satisfying as consuming them. That experience
has come full circle. For the past 12 summers I've had the opportunity to share my passion for
growing Renee's Garden vegetables, herbs and flowers with students at the Middlebury College
Organic Farm in Middlebury, VT.

The garden is located about a half mile from campus on a 2 acre knoll with
sweeping views of the campus and the Green Mountains. We grow
vegetables, herbs and flowers for the college's dining venues and for local
restaurants. Some of the interns and volunteers who work with me come
with previous farm experience, but most don't. For all of July and August
the interns are part of the Food Works program. Through their work at the
farm and field trips to food hubs, food incubators and agricultural
businesses the students get hands on opportunities to learn about nutrition,
food justice, food accessibility and sustainable farming. One thing I've
noticed over the years is that as knowledgeable as they are about food
issues, most students aren't familiar with the differences among seed
varieties of a particular vegetable or flower. I use the seed trials we run for Renee's Garden to show them that there are
many.

Currently we are in the middle stages of a trial of Swiss chard varieties. We
started the chard in plug flats in our hoop house. As a control the students seeded
our standard variety of chard at the same time as the new varieties. All three
varieties germinated at the same time and
had an extremely high germination rate.
Two weeks after seeding we transplanted the chard into three adjacent wide beds
in our trial garden and will follow the growth, disease resistance, taste and harvest
amounts as the trial continues. Already we noticed that one variety started to
outgrow the others in the last few days before transplanting. We
will report our
results to Renee after the trials end this fall.

Because we are selling most of our production to the chefs at Middlebury's
Dining Services or local restaurants, our produce needs to look good as
well as taste great. Over many season's trials certain varieties of zucchini,
chard and lettuce proved best for our markets: "Raven" zucchini, "Bright
Lights" swiss chard and "Jericho" romaine lettuce. Raven tastes fantastic,
has uniform color and shape and is very productive and disease resistant.
Jericho produces large, sweet tasting heads that withstand the heat of our
summers. Bright Lights produces over a long growing season and packs
into multi-colored bunches as colorful as flower bouquets.

As our primary focus is educational we get to
experiment with different methods of growing the same vegetable varieties. Some of our
experiments are done for our own curiosity and others are done in collaboration with faculty
for class work. During a very dry period we will irrigate one plot while not watering another
plot of the same vegetable
variety. We will vary the distances between plants of the same
variety in different sections of the garden to see how it effects production, flavor and even
ease of harvest. We've tried lots of different pruning and trellising techniques with our
tomatoes, cucumbers and pole beans. This year we are using two different fertilization
options (fish fertilizer and alfalfa meal) for the same variety of broccoli. The broccoli was
planted for fall harvest so an Environmental Studies class can assess head size, productivity
and taste on both plots in late September.

I am sure it is the same for the students working in the college garden now as it was for me
when I was first starting out in the garden when I was in college. Whether we are tasting vegetables raw in the field or
sitting down to a meal of our own produce, there is no better aspect of seed trials than eating the fruits of our labor.

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When the Time Is Ripe
Harvesting Vegetables for Best Flavor
will help you pick vegetables at their peak.

Recipe of the Month
Green Goddess Salad Dressing
Outstanding on a salad of fresh Romaine lettuce with thinly sliced cucumbers.
Best Wishes, Renee Shepherd

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