



E-Newsletter Archives

## SET THE TABLE FROM YOUR GARDEN

August 2014



### 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 seasons 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.

[More from our NE trial garden](#)

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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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