



Stewarding the Land for Future Generations
Local, Sustainable, Organic

Community Supported Agriculture Newsletter

October 12th, 2006- Week 19

Featured Vegetable of the Week: Turnips

Turnips (*Brassica rapa* L.) are a root Brassica crop and have been used as a vegetable for human consumption in Europe since prehistoric times. The turnip at one time was hailed as the vegetable of the nobility. It has been considered a source of food for humans and animals in both ancient and modern civilizations. Native to western Asia, it is grown today in the United States, Asia and Europe. The turnip, which was actually used for trading in young colonies, has been grown in America since 1622 in Massachusetts. The Indian turnip was grown for its seeds, which produced Colza oil, was used to fill lamps in Europe during the 13th century. It has also been used as a natural medicine for treating measles, cancer, small pox, chilblains and gout. The turnip was even fermented for an alcoholic beverage in early centuries. European farmers were introduced to a variety called the “stubble turnip” during the 17th and 18th century, which led to the period known as the “Age of the Turnip.” The turnip has been mentioned with admiration by Robinson Crusoe, as well as Thomas Jefferson who grew several varieties on his plantation.

Turnip roots have been a popular livestock fodder for at least 600 years wherever the crop can be grown. For most of that time turnip roots have been managed as forage. Researchers in the United States determined in the early 1900s that turnip roots are valuable energy sources for young ruminant animals. However, livestock farmers at that time were turning away from the Brassica root crops (which also include rutabagas or swedes) for fodder because much hand labor was required for the production and utilization of the large roots. One study showed that the labor requirement on a nutrient basis for these crops was three times that needed for corn silage production.

In the late 1970s, however, researchers began to demonstrate the potential of turnip as pasture. The development of varieties with partially exposed roots rendered the roots more available to grazing animals. Livestock graze turnip tops and roots readily, and the forage is of high quality. Pasturing eliminates the need for manual labor in harvesting and storing. In general, the root Brassicas are fast-growing, high yielding and well adapted to seeding into existing pastures with little or no tillage or to seeding into a conventionally prepared seedbed.

Turnips are a cool-weather crop and well adapted for the northern parts of the United States and Europe and for Great Britain and Canada. They are a biennial which generally forms seed the second year or even late in the fall in the first year if planted early in the spring. Brassicas are both cold-hardy and drought-tolerant. They can be planted late-even as a second crop-and provide high-quality grazing late in the fall. Turnips planted in July will provide grazing from September to November. The most vigorous root growth takes place during periods of low temperature (40 to 60 F) in the fall. The leaves maintain their nutritional quality even after repeated exposure to frost. Like other Brassicas, turnip grows best in a moderately deep loam, fertile and slightly acid soil. Turnip does not do well in soils that are of high clay texture, wet or poorly drained. For good root growth turnip needs a loose, well aerated soil.

Ask the Farmers...

CSA member and entomology-enthusiast Tom Ward asks, "what is the strangest insect you have seen this season?"

I was walking down to our perennial field early in the morning and I noticed a fair amount of hummingbird activity there. I was looking at the hyssop plants and noticed a moth that I thought was a hummingbird at first. It was black and white striped, and what made me realize that it was a moth and not a hummingbird was that it had a proboscis instead of a beak. I watched it dance around the perennial field for a while, and later found out that it is called a sphinx moth.



Daniel Wyatt, Wolf Gulch Farm



Michael Phlox, Wolf Gulch Farm

The strangest insect I noticed this summer was a beetle that is fairly small, about 3/4 inch long, and a very metallic, electric blue-green color. The color is so brilliant that it almost blinds you. I was reminded of a small, robot-bug when I saw it. I never found out what it is called.

Two Bug Books

Review by Tom Ward, 9 October 2006

Insects of the Pacific Northwest by Peter Haggard and Judy Haggard
Timber Press Field Guide, 2006, 295 pages, soft bound.

The Butterflies of Cascadia by Robert Michael Pyle
Seattle Audubon Society, 2002, 419 pages, soft bound.

These field guides are the best insect identification and insect lifestyle resources that I have seen for Ecotopian farmers and naturalists. With color photographs and dense scientific text they feed my information hunger. I have been collecting field guides for half a century and these are great! I would also refer you to the Golden Guide series with more general pocket books that are continent wide in scope. These can often be found used.

The huge beetle that bombed my solar wall one mid September night is *Ergates spiculatus*. And bugs are actually a subgroup of insects. Spiders are not insects and we await the Pacific Northwest guide for them yet. Butterflies are especially variable here in the Siskiyou. Moths are too but until the Haggards published we were short on guides. Pyle even ended his book with a plea for someone to study the moths!

Much pollination of our gardens is effected by other than European honey bees who are generally in decline. Flies, beetles, moths, butterflies, wasps, hornets, bats and many other entities flop around in flowers. We need to encourage our local helpers. Some ideas can be found in *The Forgotten Pollinators* by Gary Nabhan, published at least ten years ago.



Tom Ward,
Social Forester, Permaculture
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