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A COOK'S GARDEN

Planning a Plot Without a 'Net

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Country people used to look to the sky for gardening advice, and some still do, taking cues from the phases of the moon, the positions of the constellations, the angle of the sun, the shape of the clouds. More typically now, a tiny, slow-moving dot of light beams an endless stream of fact and fiction to the satellite dishes in their yards, and thence to their PCs and Macs. Tidbits of plant lore appear with a click of the mouse. The right time to sow chervil root? Click! A source of Italian peppers? Click!

This handy system came to a crashing halt for me recently when my dish cut out and left me to my own devices. Furious at first, I realized how much I'd come to depend on the Internet's instant gratification. But it surprised me how quickly I readjusted to gardening offline, plodding happily through my library and flipping through seed catalogues by the fire with a mug of hot tea. Our household's collection of books on plants and how to grow them is a source of great pleasure. It's also a bit like the drawer of candles and flashlights we keep for the day the power goes out.

There are some things the Web is very good at: instant fact sheets from Cooperative Extension, reader forums such as those on <http://www.gardenweb.com/>, sites hosted by aficionados of favorite plants. Still, you must often sift through plenty of unreliable information (so much for speed), and a lot of what you find is either too elementary or so technical you can't make sense of it.

The books I reach for often are slightly beat-up, time-tested ones, by growers who know their subjects deeply. The first garden book I ever consulted was J.I. Rodale's "How to Grow Vegetables & Fruits by the Organic Method" (1961), and I use it still. Much of it goes crop by crop, as does Yann Lovelock's "The Vegetable Book", published in 1972 and full of quirky lore. I even dive occasionally into Fearing Burr's "The Field and Garden Vegetables of America," reprinted from the 1865 edition in 1988 by the American Botanist in Chillicothe, Ill., -- great for obscure food plants such as samphire and snail trefoil. The 1885 English edition of M.M. Vilmorin-Andrieux's

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"The Vegetable Garden" has similar riches, beautifully illustrated with fine engravings.

E. Annie Proulx, better known for "The Shipping News," did cooks a great favor with "The Gourmet Gardener" in 1987, as did the English writer Joy Larkcom with "Oriental Vegetables" (1991), which sorts out all those confusing greens. And I'm always on the lookout for good books on individual crops, such as Ron L. Engeland's "Growing Great Garlic" (1991) or Lon Rombough's "The Grape Grower" (2002) or Michael Phillips's "The Apple Grower" (second revised edition, 2005). William Woys Weaver's "Heirloom Vegetable Gardening" (1997) is a fascinating reference I consult often.

For nitty-gritty data I turn to "Knott's Handbook for Vegetable Growers" (1980) by Oscar A. Lorenz and Donald N. Maynard, a treasury of lists and tables. For seed-starting, it's "Park's Success With Seeds" by Ann Reilly, newly revised in 2006. For seed-saving it's Suzanne Ashworth's "Seed to Seed," updated in 2002. To understand soil fertility, it's hard to beat "A Book About Soils for the Home Gardener" (1972) by H. Stuart Ortloff and Henry B. Raymore. Another wise book is Beatrice Trum Hunter's "Gardening Without Poisons" (1964). Among pest handbooks, "Pests of the Garden and Small Farm" (1998) by Mary Louise Flint is the most informative.

Often the best information, not to mention inspiration, is mined from old books aimed chiefly at farmers, from a day when the difference between gardening and farming was chiefly one of scale rather than between craft and industry. A home gardener could do a lot worse, on a rainy day, than to wander through Leonard Wickenden's "Make Friends With Your Land" (1949) or his "Gardening With Nature" (1955). Discover the great old British agriculture writers: H.J. Massingham's sage and accessible writings are collected in "A Mirror of England," edited by Edward Abelson in 1988 (Massingham died in 1952). Michael Graham's "Soil and Sense" (1941) and P.H. Hainsworth's "Agriculture: A New Approach" (1954) are other such treasures.

Many of these titles are out of print, but most are sure to be in the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville if not in your local library, and it's an adventure to collect them from used-book dealers. Simpler yet, go to an online used-book merchant such as <http://www.abebooks.com/>. They have nearly everything, and all it takes is a click.

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