

The Year in Kale - A Sort of Love Story

Anita Golton

The third month brings hope, light, freedom, energy, activity, emergence, relief, pride. It's not like spring anywhere else. Alaskans become unhinged when the March sunshine soaks into their bones. Even though there are at least two more months until the birch tree buds unfurl into leaves. Even though a morning glance at the phone weather app would propel the vast majority of sane individuals to don lined, ankle length, puffy coats and synthetic ear muffs. Even though there will be snow on the ground into May most years. To Alaskans, sunshine in March is the definition of Spring.

And so, despite most excellent cross country ski conditions and the prediction of clear night skies with abundant and awe-inspiring astronomical viewing, seeds must be planted now.

Inside, three millimeter, spherical *Brassica oleracea* seeds are tenderly bedded in a bit of potting soil and positioned in the windowsill or under a bank of environmentally-unfriendly fluorescent bulbs. Essential ingredients in the recipe for beginning growth: rays of light, sprinkles of water, a blanket of plastic wrap, and some compost tea. Add a little love, and these seemingly inert, minuscule, sleeping brown dots will soon come alive.

Anticipation now joins Spring's erratic emotions. There's a kind of obsessive hourly hovering that is a welcome distraction from paying bills, checking emails,

burning toast and arguing about the only season worth dreading with its impending April deadline just two weeks away. Droplets of moisture condensate on the underside of the plastic seed tray cover and eventually escape as vapor, regularly requiring the only residential dehumidifier in a state known for seven months of dry skin and bloody noses.

Finally, around day five, tiny arched, pale tendrils heave the dirt aside and poke their newborn heads toward the light. Germination success snowballs this kale's life into motion. Another day, and like some magical fairy-tale, all the dirty winter snow is forgotten, and the first mini leaves of July through November's forthcoming sustenance has turned the whole world green.

Sets of two small, unfolding, emerald leaves just above the soil's surface that slightly resemble a little heart, quickly transform into two-inch tall actual, genuine, they-look-like-they're-gonna-make-it, baby Brassica plants. Each little seedling has so much verdant potential that the temptation to pluck it and a few of its siblings out of the dirt and eat them right then and there, must be quashed with the knowledge of how much is to come.

And so it grows. And grows. And grows. At three inches tall, desperation to spread roots must be acknowledged and the traumatic, liberating voyage to the great outdoors after eight weeks in the kitchen provokes a joyful, upward burst. Recuperation from transplanting takes a week or so. Then, with June's eighteen hours of daylight, a few outer leaves take on the familiar, deep pine color reminiscent of a very different, darker time of year. Each of the varieties, Red

Russian, Rainbow, Scarlet, Tuscano and traditional curled Vates has a dusty almost devilish hue to the thickening yet papery leaf. Foliage edges ripple and curl. And a few of the younger outer leaves are finally edible, perfect for adding to a fresh salad or any of so many sandwiches packed for lunch during Summer's insistent hustle and buzz.

It's a good thing too, because last year's frozen stash has dwindled down to two sad plastic vacuum packages with unknown origination dates and loose, unappealing, icy, freezer-burned chunks. That first harvest is always the sweetest, especially when compared to winter's grocery store vegetables that have traveled 2000 miles in a refrigerated truck only to shrivel and yellow after two days at home.

July brings the beginning of the onslaught. There is now so much kale, that it's required eating at every meal.

The circumstances and extremes don't seem to matter: hot sun and drought for three weeks, chilly rain for two months, gobs of chickweed, frolicking farm dogs, freak hail storm, even heavy hooves and heavy munching by the Mom and yearling moose who ignore all fencing, buckshot, barking and crazed hollering with flailing arms. Kale endures. So little food originates from within the state of Alaska. Steadfast survivors are crucial to invigorate any chances for Alaskans' infamous, yet rarely truly achievable, modern self-sufficiency.

Sustenance comes in many forms with food landing firmly at the top along with shelter and, in Alaska, heat. Among the dark leafies, kale wins. Go look it up;

it's healthy! Enough about that. But sadly, one cannot live on kale alone, nor can one build a house from it. However, once stripped of the edible leaves, the tough center stalk dried might make excellent kindling when the wood stove is reawakened to fend off the Autumn chill. Never tried it.

And it's durable. Not durable like boot leather. Yes, surely some intransigent old-timer might contend that kale *tastes* like boot leather. Her loss. Durable: meaning, not only will it keep growing after outer leaves are continually picked for three months. Not only will it live on and stay green under the snow. But once harvested, the leaves are so long-lasting that one could pack some into a special bag and schlep it in a backpack on a Long and Far Alaska Adventure in order to tear it up into little pieces, no cutting board required, and add it to dinner. Voila! Instant ramen turned delicious, healthy and green in the wilds of the Talkeetna Mountains.

Delicious is, of course, objective. In order to proclaim a love affair with a vegetable, and perform due diligence when handed the fresh bounty (we're talking five, heavy-duty thirty-three gallon, black trash bags full), creativity becomes necessity. Add to spaghetti sauce. Add to macaroni and cheese. Massage with salad dressing and add toppings for a filling salad. Currently lovin' Kale Caesars. Add tender leaves on a sandwich. Bake kale chips with nutritional yeast and sea salt. Use the tiny crumbs left in the bottom of the kale chip container as a popcorn topping. Saute fresh leaves and add to any pizza. Add to soup. Kale pesto. Kale smoothies. How about pureed kale in fruit leather? Add to quiche or anything eggy. Add to anything Italian, especially lasagna and all pasta. Add to anything

Mexican: burritos, quesadillas, tacos. And, most importantly, blanch, vacuum package and freeze to consume for six more months.

The best years yield ample greens from July through December. Quite the wild image forms when picturing the last fresh(ish) harvest. Down coat over Carhartt coveralls over thermal long johns. Army issue bunny boots over wool socks. Icicles protruding from a graying beard. Snowshoes strapped on to stay above the twenty inches of the first of Winter's significant accumulation. Shovel in gloved hand. Gentle humps in a row. Once exhumed from their cold, snowy grave, each kale shrub oddly resembles a mini, cheery Christmas tree as outer leaves now angle downward and the center sticks up, much like abundant tall Black Spruce in the neighboring forest. Amazingly, although the plants have lost significant moisture, the kale seems suspended in time, dusky leaves now in harmony with the dim, ever-present twilight of Solstice. This kale will compliment some kind of holiday pot-luck dish, providing already-longed-for fresh, green bits in stuffing or mashed potatoes, or a cranberry and rice casserole.

When the deep cold of January seeps down and shrivels up the remaining plants beyond even the least discriminating palate, we'll make do with the 20 packages in the freezer, one a week until new, tender shoots rise again.