

GOOD KING HENRY

by Mike Mason

As I remarked in a previously article, I love perennial vegetables. They are usually robust and take on the weeds with gusto. They have deep roots so can find their own water. They often have a long cropping period. Usually they are not too affected by pests or diseases. And they taste good!

Now for one of the secrets of the allotment: Good King Henry. It has at least two other names – mercury and Lincolnshire asparagus. It has been a traditional English vegetable for a long time. It has been found growing wild near ancient Roman sites in the UK so it may have been cultivated here for two thousand years or more. Yet I have never seen it on sale in the shops or in restaurants.

If you would like a vegetable which crops for nine months of the year, Good King Henry is the one. I have never tried protecting it with fleece from December to March but feel it would keep growing during those months if given adequate protection.

I first came across Good King Henry in a seed catalogue, but had never seen it grown. The seeds were extremely small and the packet seemed to contain thousands. I sowed hundreds of seeds on the allotment but only six germinated. I let them grow for a couple of years before sampling my first crop. The plant grows about 30 inches high and flops over so that it occupies an area about 4 feet in diameter. The leaves are quite large, 3 or more inches in diameter in the shape of the spade in a pack of cards. One takes the leaves only, leaving the narrow stems, and cooks the leaves like spinach. About 100 leaves are adequate for two people. The taste is very good, like a refined sort of spinach, which goes particularly well with oily fish such as mackerel, salmon and herring. And this is a spinach which does not bolt and has an enormous growing period.

Good King Henry is most unusual in that it pushes up new shoots all the time which have flowers on them immediately, seemingly as they emerge from the soil. As the shoots grow to their full height the flowers develop and leaves emerge from the sides of the shoots. After a few months thousands of seeds are deposited all around. However, germination is very poor, so one ends up with only a few new plants. I kept my original six plants in the same position for about 10 years and gradually my six plants developed into quite a clump. I then decided to replant them in a row across the allotment so that the individual plants would have more space and I could look after them better.

My row of Good King Henry

I replanted 37 plants about one foot apart in a row right across the allotment. The plants were quite large and old. Nevertheless, every one survived the transplanting which is a tribute to their hardiness. Once one can persuade them to germinate they seem to grow forever. In the open they start pushing up new shoots in March, they grow all year, then they are beaten down by severe frosts in December. They then leave strawy stems which can be removed and composted.

The weeds just cannot grow in the vicinity of my Good King Henry, since they are swamped. I have not seen any pests on the plants but occasionally have some roughly circular holes in a few leaves made by an as yet unidentified culprit. Since pests do not seem to be a problem one does not need to use chemicals so the crops are perfectly organic. Birds do not seem interested, nor do the muntjac deer. I feel that the plants would grow in almost any soil. The only attention I give them is to draw up farmyard manure close to the plants in the dormant season, but I feel that they would still grow vigorously without that enrichment.

Good King Henry could also be grown in a herbaceous border since it is quite attractive with its dark green foliage and cascading flowering stems. The flowers are tiny and green.

Lincolnshire asparagus

Now for some magic. The plants have two distinct types of crop. I have already mentioned the leaves being used as spinach. The young shoots can also be used like asparagus.

What I do, in late April and again later in the year, is to cut half the plants (now 30 inches high) down to the ground and put the cut plants in the compost heap. This brutal treatment stimulates the roots to put forth a host of new shoots. When the shoots are 6 to 9 inches high I crop them, again cutting them down to the ground. I then take the cut shoots, remove nearly all the lower leaves together with their stalks (the stalks are stringy) but leave on the flowering top and a few very small leaves. The shoots are then cooked and eaten like asparagus. They are simply delicious on their own with butter but can also be served as a side vegetable with meat and fish dishes. The shoots are not at all stringy and are wonderful. Later in the season the other half of the row can receive the same brutal treatment. The plants do not seem to mind. I have not lost any of them and my original plants have been growing strongly since 1991 and seem to be immortal.

An interesting aspect is the fact that Good King Henry has very deep roots which grow down into the subsoil. It therefore may perform a similar function to comfrey (which is considered to be inedible). Some gardeners grow perennial comfrey to cut continuously and place in the compost heap. The deep roots extract key nutrients from the subsoil – and these nutrients, trace elements and so on, form part of the compost for eventual spreading on the soil. The comfrey thus “mines” the nutrients and trace elements for the benefit of the garden generally. I feel that Good King Henry probably serves the same purpose – thus the leaves and shoots are probably rich in trace elements and nutrients which are good for our health. I have no proof of this but it seems logical to me.

So there you have it. A delicious vegetable which has two forms, has an extremely long growing season, seems to grow forever, is seemingly unaffected by pests and diseases, transplants easily, suppresses weeds and never needs watering. Magic!

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