



The Four Seasons In Pan's Garden

By Monika Carless

The cycles of my smallholding – called Pan's Garden – bring a pleasant rhythm to my life. Each season has its own rewards; homesteading is one of the best parts of my experience on this earth.

Spring

Around here, spring arrives mid-January, about the same time the seed catalogues fill the mail box. If one is very perceptive, there are nuances of spring outside. Owls are preparing to mate, the days are already stretching, and on some afternoons you can feel the earth responding to the longer light. I like to wait until there is a good blizzard to rummage through last year's leftover seeds. When making my seed order, I have a ritual of strong coffee, a roaring fire, and a crumble made from last summer's frozen fruit. Heritage seeds bring history alive in the garden, I think, so those are the seeds I look for first. Organic, open pollinated, suitable to my garden space, heavy yielding (important in a small garden) are other criteria.

There are always too many seeds, but I share at a local seed exchange. Some, saved in paper bags from last year's harvest, are mainly from varieties that I am afraid will one day disappear. Of course, the dill, borage, and coriander save themselves. They are first to poke out of the ground, where they have dropped the season before. I have them picked and dried before they explode with too much exuberance.

Does everyone feel as I do about perennial crops in the garden? One will never starve if they have Jerusalem artichokes! Perennials fall well into our philosophy of following a mix of permaculture and biodynamic principles. The asparagus, artichokes, currants, apples, and cooking herbs inspire many a dish as the seasons change. They grow faithfully year after year, with little effort on our part. From early spring on, our smallholding keeps us in bitter herbs for digestive teas and spring tonic soup. Leftover leeks, smothered under straw during the winter, plus freshly dug Jerusalem artichokes, are perfect for a light casserole with Gorgonzola cheese.

Pan's Garden is well protected by a grove of tall pines on all sides. It enjoys a microclimate furthered by the use of raised beds, where the earth drains early and warms at least two weeks ahead of row gardens. We disturb the soil as little as possible, planting carrots, beets, spring greens, and onions in early April, covering with a light cloth for frost protection. The garlic, planted in the fall, is the first to brave the cold, and by the end of May there is always the inevitable question from some visitor: "How is your corn already so tall?" I have to laugh, because this happens every year without fail, but serves as a good segue into a lesson about growing garlic. Our homestead, a mere acre-and-a-quarter, has the feel of larger proportions, as it neighbors a farm with forest and fields. The growing conditions are ideal for morels, which I discovered with great excitement our first spring here. There are never enough, if one is to dry some for winter use. They are used sparingly, like saffron, in favorite recipes, such as linguini in a light Bechamel sauce. It is good to have things by the season. One can truly appreciate the gift of something available for a short period of time. It makes the turning of the seasons very poignant.



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My biodynamic calendar sets the pace for planting days. Never mind if I feel like planting lettuce on a root day, one must obey the order set out by the planets and moon, or keep fingers crossed for an abundant harvest. Since I have been using the moon as a guide in the garden, I have come to believe in the intelligence of a natural order. Strong plants, early germination, and heavy crops bear witness to the wisdom that Nature provides.

Spring mornings hit a pleasant rhythm once the soil is warm in the beds. Wash and hang the laundry. Feed the animals – this year: goats, chickens, heritage breed turkeys, and pigs. Piglets want to be brushed and nip my pants looking for treats. I sip my tea as I walk the land and decide on chores for the day. Bake quiche with overwintered leeks, herbs, and last year's sun-dried tomatoes. Haul composted straw/manure towards the garden for mulch before the day becomes too hot. Take out the seeds and decide which beds to plant. Oh wait! What day is it, leaf or root? Make a new decision. Eat quiche. ▶

Quiche with Leeks, Sun-Dried Tomatoes and Morels

Good for breakfast, lunch or dinner. For less fat, omit butter and cream...but why?

A handful or two fresh morels, at least eight, well washed

Two small leeks, all parts, well washed

Small knob of butter, salt and pepper to taste

1/2 tsp dried thyme and a dash or two of nutmeg

5-6 organic eggs

1/2 cup organic cream

100 ml sun-dried tomatoes in oil

3/4 cup nippy cheese, extra old Quebec cheddar or what pleases you, but nothing smoked or you'll drown out the morels

Pastry for one pie placed in a deep dish pie plate.

Drain tomatoes and reserve oil. Chop leeks and morels into medium-sized bits.

Heat two tsp reserved oil and butter in pan, sauté leeks and morels lightly, cool and add to plate lined with pastry.

Add sun-dried tomatoes, cheese, salt, pepper, thyme, and nutmeg.

Whip up six eggs with the organic cream and pour into the dish.

Bake in a preheated oven at 375F, until the eggs set in the middle and the quiche rises slightly, about 30 minutes.

Serve with crusty bread and/or steamed greens.

(If you would like to omit pastry, you can bake this as a frittata in a well-oiled, pre-heated baking dish or cast iron frying pan at the same oven temperature.)

Summer

Spring speeds into summer showing no mercy. A warm start to the season leads to cold and too much rain, then a blast of unseasonable heat and more rain and cold. I shake my head as I plant more beets and carrots where the first seeding failed due to drowning. It is a leaf day, but I have fewer choices now. The tomatoes are finally liberated from their cramped quarters in my front window, taking full advantage of ample leg room in soil sprinkled with organic seaweed powder. One type each for salsa, fresh eating, drying, and sauce should do.

There is not enough space in the garden this year, as we took up six large beds overrun with mint. The Lords Wilbur and

Currant-Squash Bread

A twist on Zucchini Bread. This recipe is very versatile; you can use dried cherries also and add a bit of almond flavor or even add orange zest instead of using currants.

3 organic eggs
1 cup cold pressed sunflower oil
½ cup fair trade raw sugar
2 cups grated yellow patty pan squash (or yellow zucchini if need be)
2 tsp. real vanilla
½ cup plain yogurt
2 ¼ cups organic, unbleached flour
2 ¼ tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. grey sea salt
1 cup dried currants
Some sliced almonds

Pre-heat oven to 375 F. Grease a 4-loaf pan with butter. Sift flour, baking powder, soda and salt together. Beat eggs, oil, yogurt and sugar till light and fluffy. Add dry ingredients to wet, do not over-mix. Gently add currants and grated squash to batter. Pour into the four little loaf compartments, sprinkle with crushed almond slices and bake 35 to 40 minutes or till toothpick comes out clean. Very light and not too sweet, and no-one will guess what the yellow bits are in the cake.

Alastair Tamworth (as we've named our heritage breed piglets) are in the process of roto-rooting out the whole tangle of weeds and mints that had made my oldest six beds unusable. That area will be the squash bed next year. So there will only be enough potatoes for one family reunion and Thanksgiving dinner this year.

However, there is no shortage of organic farms around here. A large network of growers, conventional to organic, are united by "Simcoe County Farm Fresh" a group that supplies a handy map of area farms, and advocates shopping locally for seasonal

food. The map is not only handy to residents in the neighboring towns, but to tourists, restaurants, caterers, and progressive shops who support transitioning to local resilience.

Our salad greens and peas are decidedly late, but not unappreciated when they do reach harvest. I can have a whole breakfast of peas, radishes, and greens picked as I weed in the early morning, with one hard-boiled egg quickly stowed in my pocket on my way out the door. The apple trees are so loaded with fruit that we have had to prop them up with an odd assortment of timbers and saw horses. This is definitely an apple year, aided by a generous gift of barn compost spread under their canopies in early spring.

Work in the summer garden ends by noon. All weeding, mulching, feeding, watering, and propping is happy work until the heat chases me into the house. A rain barrel is usually all we need for the purposes of watering, unless there is a drought. One week without rain is called drought around here! I try to be fair as to distributing the water, but I have to say that the garlic, squash, and potatoes, heavily mulched, are the only annual crops to never complain. My experiment this year has been to see whether the garlic scapes did indeed need to be snipped off in order for the garlic to grow more robust. The idea is that if the scapes are not allowed to develop, all of the plants' energy will be put to developing the bulb. I compare the two sets of plants, cut and uncut, for size and flavor and do not notice any difference at all, except that the bulbs planted deeper grow larger, no matter if there is a scape or not. However, I will snip the scapes next year anyway, because they are wildly versatile when cooked, barbecued, or pickled.

Volunteer plants such as tomatoes and squash are kept if they look like they came from an open pollinated variety. We grew some interesting squash specimens one year, which I gave to a friend for supper. But she called to say that it was a gourd and inedible. So now, all squash that does not resemble a previously grown variety is added to the large item compost pile.

Our outdoor solar dryer is in full swing from late spring to fall. All manner of herbs, mushrooms, tomatoes, and apple rings are carefully arranged on the shelves for sun-drying.

Much to my family's and friends' dismay, I make and cancel plans according to the whims of the rain and sun, as no sunny day can be wasted if all the growing, harvesting, and preserving is to be done. "I'll be in the garden" is my mantra if someone wants to know where I'll be in spring, summer, and early fall. Trips? Wintertime. But would I want it any other way?

Summer days are fragrant with pesto making, infusing oils and vinegars, crushing herbs into containers, pickling scapes, making cordials and fruit preserves. The circle of seed to table is rich with memories of days spent in the company of the plant kingdom. It is a moving meditation. The plants are always willing to share their wisdom and joy in being alive. I approach every harvest and transplant with an attitude of gratitude and especially a "heads up," as it were, that I will be gathering food for a meal.



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Autumn

“Seed to Table” is a popular phrase conjuring images of the peaceful process we enter when we eat what we sow. When I lived in the city, I dreamt of the luxury and blessing of being able to plant my own food, tend it, gather it, and cook it for my family. There could be nothing fresher, healthier, or more loved than the vegetables we had started in flats while the snow flew outside.

The heirloom tomatoes have proven to be a good fit for our garden, producing many batches of salsa, sauce, and countless salads. Our sun-room is filled with bushels of apples, squash, onions, and garlic. Yin Yang and Jacob’s Cattle beans look so jolly in storage jars that I may not have the courage to cook them! Applesauce has been jarred and frozen. Every trip down a back road reminds me how much wild fruit is free for the picking. Wild apples, apples planted by migrating bears, apple trees part of old homesteads, all ripe and falling to the ground. Old variety apples make great cider. Next year, friends and I are planning on raiding a few farmer’s fields (permission asked of course), and getting together for a day of cider making. One cider press will also make the rounds to those of us with our own apple trees, and we will make the rounds with it to help crush, press, and drink the cider!

My daughter remembers being chased by a throng of cows as we attempted to pick apples in an abandoned orchard one year. It’s one of her best childhood memories. I hope for more children to have such memories. Even in rural towns, children are lacking in these experiences. I sit in the garden separating garlic bulbs for fall planting and dream of schools with gardens and orchards as part of the curriculum, with fields to run in, not concrete. Our children, homeschooled, had such rich experiences in Nature as part of their unorthodox education.

The wind picks up and I am brought back to my chores. Some garden beds are cleaned and snugly mulched for the winter. Others still are luxuriant in dark glossy kale, crisp rainbow chard, beets, and carrots. The leeks stand tall, and bring thoughts of French peasant cuisine...vichyssoise, pasta dishes, baked root veggies with leeks and onions, creamed leeks. Finches feed on sunflower heads, echinacea and Jerusalem artichoke seed pods. Massive flocks of migrating blackbirds fly overhead and fill the sky with their raucous chatter. I should dry some more sage for savory dishes and to burn as incense. A second crop of kohlrabi looks like it may produce a harvest but it may need some cover as the days get colder. The rosemary will need potting soon, to be brought into the house. It will need coddling: misting, a hot window (I miss houses with large sills), and a feeding of coffee each week to keep its cranky self limping along towards spring until it can be planted back outside. I’ll wait for a colder day to plant the garlic, and will check the calendar for the right day to do so. The heritage green bean pods are almost ready to pick for seed saving. These beans have the taste



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Salsa

The best I have tried; you'll never eat store bought again.

- 1/2 lb jalapeno peppers, chopped fine
- 8 cups chopped salsa tomatoes (Roma or San Marzano)
- 3 cups chopped sweet banana peppers
- 3 cups chopped red and green peppers
- 2 cups chopped onions
- 4 large cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup apple cider vinegar
- 2 tsp. fair trade raw sugar
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. dried basil or oregano
- 2 small cans organic tomato paste
- 1/4 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro, added after cooking

Put peppers and onions through the food processor to chop. Chop hot peppers carefully by hand or in processor. Cut tomatoes by hand. Put all ingredients in a large non-reactive pot, cook slowly, uncovered, until you reach the desired consistency, stirring often. Add cilantro at the end, and pour into 6 hot 500ml. wide mouth jars. These can be processed in a hot water bath for ten minutes. I usually just turn the jars over quickly to form a seal, but you’ll be safer with the hot water bath. Warning: One batch will *not* last through the winter. This recipe can be doubled.

of ones I ate in Europe. Tender in texture, almost buttery, they are flat and deliver flavor in spades.

I watch the weather now, to check for upcoming frost warnings. If impending, I rush out with a cloth row cover. I will be happy for a break in the work, and enjoy the meals that come from three seasons of intense gardening. Looking at the garden tidy and tucked in, I am glad the soil can rest too. It has given so much. I think I will make kale chips for a snack. I head inside for a bowl. The onion and beet bake is already sending a rich aroma through the house. Do I have any of that homemade feta cheese left? ▷

Winter

As Christmas approaches, I am still digging carrots, beets, and leeks out from under the cover of snow. Even the parsley braves the weather, but after the New Year, it too will succumb to the ravages of winter in this part of the world. We had hoped to build a small hoop house before winter came to grow spinach and other winter hardy greens during the cold season. But it will have to be a spring project now. I've read and re-read Eliot Coleman's bible on the *Four Season Harvest*. Fresh greens all winter is a very enticing thought. I dare not buy any at the super-market, all sprayed and dragged cross-continent against their will. But we can have coleslaw, apple slaw, carrot salad, raw beet salad, or any combination of those three. Some greens we chose for the hoop

Squash Supper

Serve squash with a salad of winter greens, a whole roasted garlic head, and a good artisan baguette. If you are not vegetarian, add crispy, organic bacon to the salad for a higher protein meal. Some French olives and a good red wine are recommended. (Adapted from "Jamie at Home")

4 small squash
1/2 tsp. each dried oregano, coriander seeds
1 or 2 dried chillies, salt to taste
1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
One small jar sun-dried tomatoes in oil
A bit of good blue cheese or freshly grated Romano

Cut squash in half and spoon out the seeds. Give seeds to the squirrels.

Place the squash in a baking dish, smear some of the oil from the tomatoes onto the squash and season with salt and the spices you have crushed with a mortar and pestle. Add some sun-dried tomatoes into each.

Roast at 350F for 45 minutes or until the squash is soft. Crumble some blue cheese on top and serve either one whole squash if small or one half on each plate with the winter greens dressed simply in white balsamic vinaigrette.

house are Claytonia, mache, and arugula. They are quite cold hardy even in an unheated enclosure. A few layers of garden cloth at night will keep in the heat after a day of sun. I visited one on a winter's day last year and you could actually sit in there with only a sweater on, munching fresh greens and sipping mint tea. Does life really get any better than that?

Three more raised beds to be added to the back of the garden as well. I'm trying to be efficient in planning next year's crops. More potatoes and winter squash. Less summer squash (oy, those zucchini!), more onions, less coriander. A closer rotation

of sweet peas and summer greens. One less variety of salsa tomatoes. We really should have picked more wild mushrooms, I think to myself as I check my stock for tonight's stew. Or grow some Shitakes? Winter days are for contemplating the things the garden has taught me. Every year I learn so much more. Which crops crowd out others? Where was there too much shade because of my crop rotation? Which weeds and herbs left to themselves offered food to insects and so protected my crops? This year, I found that my coriander and anise hosted a bevy of parasitic wasps, for which I was most grateful. An army of bumblebees pollinated their little hearts out as well. I wonder if they are making the evolutionary leap to survival that the honey bees cannot? We noticed the absence of any potato, squash, or cucumber beetles, and for the first year, not one tomato hornworm! Something in the symbiosis of this garden is working.

The chickens are getting a warm mash of organic barley and oats cooked for them when temperatures dip to below 20C. My partner peers into the pot of grains cooking on the stove. "Is this for me or the chickens?" he yells over to the living room. "Who cooks for chickens anyway?" he queries. I do, and look out to the chicken coop as the blizzard rages and hope that they are warm enough. Their diet is further supplemented with seaweed, flax seeds, and kitchen scraps. Nothing is too good for my ladies. Their coop was insulated partly with leftover lama and alpaca wool from a friend's farm. I am insanely proud of this. The garden journal needs a lookover to make plans for the new season. Maybe a few more currant bushes? I think that the catalogues may be coming soon...I'll just take out the old ones for a quick peek.

Quite often we are asked whether we are hoping to become self-sufficient. While it's true that I had once hoped for that, it was really a romantic ideal that grew out of a complete misunderstanding of what it would mean to be truly self-sufficient. Now we say that we are hoping to become as self-reliant as is possible farming a smallholding of such diminutive scale. Self-reliance means that we are taking responsibility for some of the food we eat and the well-being of the plants and animals in our care. Further to this, we are living our philosophy of what it means to be good stewards of the air, soil, and water that sustains us. This homestead is run on carbon-neutral wood fuel, as well as natural gas and electricity supplied by a green energy provider. We have many more dreams for lowering our impact on the land. These dreams expand in direct proportion to the expansion of our resources and imaginations.

I sit by the fire and scribble more plans into the journal. This is the good life.

Monika Carless lives on a diversified smallholding with her partner Steve and too many cats to mention. She promotes sustainable living practices and communicates with plants and animals as part of her life's work. Monika is a freelance writer and the author of Tessa and the Fairies, a children's book about the relationship between a small girl and the natural world. She can be reached through www.wholeearthspirit.com. - NL -



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