

SPRINGING VEGETABLES

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Article by Travis Hartman, all photography by Zachary Schulman

Springtime is upon us, and along with more daylight and cherry blossoms, we will get the chance to consume the bounties of spring in their purest, most local forms. While we may be able to purchase exceptional produce year-round, some varieties of vegetables and fruit are best consumed in spring and nearly impossible to find beyond the earliest months of the season.



SPRINGTIME VEGETABLES WILL SOON APPEAR AT THE COOP

Among the very first spring vegetables harvested is a member of the lily family—the asparagus. John Horsman, produce buyer at the Coop, sees local asparagus coming to the Coop in early to mid May. “Local asparagus is just a lot fresher,” Horsman said. “When you’re getting something from California, best case is harvest, then three to four days travel—it’ll be a week old before we can get it on the shelf. Local asparagus

is picked and then on the shelf the next day. You can't beat that type of freshness."

During the month of April, grab a bunch of asparagus and steam, grill, or blanch them. Asparagus is high in Vitamin K (good for blood clotting and bone health) and folate (a critical nutrient during pregnancy). This harbinger of spring will give you a double dose of both flavor and health.

Spring peas arrive in the late spring and need to be shelled to get at their goodness. They are among the sweetest pea varieties and best eaten soon after picking. They arrive at the Coop in June, but it is possible to retain that spring vibe into the later months! Buy a bunch and preserve them by quickly dunking them in boiling water and then immediately dunking them into ice cold water to stop the cooking. Place the peas into a bag and freeze to preserve a taste of spring that will last long into the winter. Good luck not eating them all before the weather gets cold again!

Local lettuces also begin arriving in the coming weeks and really expand the variety of fresh greens on the shelves. Horsman noted that little gems will start arriving soon, as well as arugula and the Coop powerhouse, lacinato kale, which will be on shelves come May. Lacinato kale is generally on shelves year-round, but "once I can get it from the local farms, I completely walk away from the others," Horsman said. The local greens—at the Coop "local" means within 500 miles—will start trickling onto shelves in the springtime, and by the time June rolls around the aisles will be bursting with local produce.

Ramps are the focus of much speculation and obsession on the East Coast of the United States. A beacon that the winter has ended, these wild leeks pop out of the just-thawed ground and grow leaves to soak up the sunshine before the trees produce foliage and block the light. Usually appearing between April and June, "ramps are tricky," said Horsman. "A lot of people have issues on ramps. Traditionally they are wild-foraged, and everyone wants the bulb, but it takes seven years for a ramp to grow back. People have decimated the population."

The Coop has not offered ramps for the past few years but is looking for sustainable sources.



Fiddlehead ferns are the coiled heads of ferns that are found all over the world, but the coils must be harvested quickly as they will unfurl into inedible ferns within a couple weeks. The flavor is said to be somewhere between green beans and asparagus with a nutty undertone. They can be boiled or steamed and tossed with butter for a

simple preparation, but don't try to sample at the store—they must be cooked before eating, as raw fiddlehead ferns can cause illness.



Morel mushrooms comprise the third part of the spring trilogy that includes ramps and fiddlehead ferns. This hollow honeycomb-capped mushroom is prized for its nutty flavor and only appears for a short time from March through June. They are extremely expensive because, like the other members of the trilogy, they must be foraged in

the wild. They also have a short growing season and because they are hollow, they don't transport well. Getting them from harvest to market as quickly as possible is important. The Coop has stocked morels from non-local sources for a few years but is currently looking for a local provider. Generally, look for darker mushrooms, as they will have a more intense flavor. You can dry morels to preserve them, and simply rehydrate with warm water when ready for use. Morels taste great when they are sautéed in butter, in a risotto with asparagus, or deep fried as a side dish in a fish fry.

Despite being the teenager of the garlic family, there is nothing awkward about green garlic. Also called fresh garlic, it's simply immature garlic that has been pulled from the ground before clove and bulb skins dehydrate. You can find it at the Coop around the end of spring and in early summer. While it may look similar to green onions, when you sniff its bulb, green garlic should have the reliable garlic smell. This young garlic can be used anywhere you would use regular garlic, but it will have a milder flavor. Additionally, since it is more mellow, it can be dropped into salads without cooking—and when consumed raw, it won't cause vampires (and everyone else for that matter) to run away.

The last notable springtime offering to be found at the Coop are potted herbs. They are perfect for window gardens. A couple herbs, potting soil and some pots for them to grow—and you will be harvesting your own parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Strawberries are also on offer and make for wonderful window garden plants.



The Coop offers a wide variety of foods year-round, but in the coming months, there will not only be ephemeral springtime produce like fiddlehead ferns—a large number of all greens will be replaced by local sourcing. The benefits of finding local sources go far beyond the freshness, says Horsman. “Traditionally, you’ll pay more for local as they are smaller farms, and I’m not against the big farms, but to me supporting farms like Lancaster and Hepworth, it’s what we should be aiming for. The farmers [at smaller farms] have more invested in their fields and have more pride in what they’re

doing, and that is reflected in the products on our shelves.”