

## **The First Greens of Spring**

*By Deborah L. Teeter*

You might be surprised by the variety of products offered at the farmers' markets this early in the year, which includes root crops like potatoes and sunchokes, apples and cider, honey, maple syrup, eggs, cheese, meat, poultry and bakery items. Those with a little gardening experience might think it's too early for the first fresh veggies of the year, but they'd be wrong – area farmers are adept at using early season crop protection methods to bring fresh herbs and the first greens of spring to an appreciative public in early April.

Many techniques and products help farmers bring crops in early, from cloches and floating row covers to cold frames and grow tunnels to green houses, both heated and unheated. Some farms start the season by planting early greens. These can include arugula, beet greens, chard, kale, dandelion, mustards, spinach, several kinds of lettuces, and the herbs dill and chervil, in beds inside their heated greenhouses and passive-solar heated hoop houses (growing structures framed by lengths of PVC pipe or conduit bent in a “hoop” shape, both ends planted in the ground, and covered with clear plastic). The greens share the heated space with plants in flats on benches, so that the entire area is used with efficiently.

Farms start with picking everything at baby size and mixing it to make salad mix or mesclun. Some of the greens will get multiple pickings until they reach bunching size, then they'll have bunched kale, chard, dill, etc., to offer customers in addition to the baby greens. As the greens finish producing, the beds can be covered with straw bales and pallets to make bench space for more transplants.

A hoop house crop can follow the greenhouse crop and will be harvested in the same manner. Some farms also grow some uncommon perennial vegetables outdoors with no protection, such as walking onions, which produce nice large green onions by early May, and watercress, which grows very quickly in the cool spring, and will be at its peak in May.

By using season extension techniques, farms harvest greens one to two months earlier than if they just planted these crops outdoors without protection while getting the most out of their heated green house space, which does not start the season full of seedling flats. Planting early greens in the unused space and timing them for harvest as space is needed for transplants, allows farmers to maximize the efficiency of the greenhouse while at the same time deliver crops to customers earlier than would be expected.

Farms make April a wonderful time to begin a season-long tradition of weekly trips to the farmers market. The reward is fine fresh food for your family, full of just-picked goodness and nutrition. Remember, the shorter the time between picking and eating, the more nutritious your food is likely to be. Buying directly from the grower is as good for them as it is for you. They get a larger share of your food dollar, and that helps them stay economically viable. Fiscally sound farms stay in business and keep the countryside we all love green and growing.