



Enjoying the Self-Sown Garden

by Karen Dustman

It's the best time of the gardening year: enjoying the fruit of things you never planted.

While my husband is out in the greenhouse toiling away (40 flats of carefully-planted seeds, and counting), I'm already reaping an early harvest from last year's garden. The spinach is up all over, scattered wide by the wind. Asparagus, too, is ready for picking, with not an ounce of my effort toward this delightful crop. The large tarragon plant that resurrects itself every year has already put out six inches of new growth.

Best find of all: a veritable green carpet of cilantro, trying hard to preempt the spot where the tomatoes will soon go. It's just two inches high so far, but immune to cold nights and making the most of these the much-warmer days. And if I don't pick it now it will soon get tilled under, along with the occasional weed sprouting companionably along with it.

And what do to with this first harvest of the season? Spinach and asparagus are easy. There's not enough of those to last long, anyhow.

For tarragon and other herbs, my dad taught me an easy trick: just wash, pat dry, then pop it in the microwave on a paper towel until the leaves are crispy (roughly a minute). For some reason the color stays much greener with microwave drying, unlike traditional air-dried herbs. I save my tiny harvest in glass jars and use it all winter long, savoring memories of days like today.

Best of all is the early cilantro harvest. Some of it, of course, makes its way into fresh salsa. The microwave trick also works well for drying this aromatic herb, though it's never quite as flavorful as when fresh-picked.

But even with the small early crop, it's easy to find yourself with way too much cilantro on your hands. My favorite solution: a frozen cilantro pesto. Plastic ice cube trays make it easy to pop out the right amount for future use. And the flavor stays nearly as good as when fresh. Another wonderful treat from your un-sown garden for the middle of winter!

SIDEBAR/BOX: *Cilantro Pesto*

Wash cilantro well, and remove the largest stems. Pat dry.

Place a generous bunch of cilantro in food processor or blender with:

½ c. olive oil

1-2 Tb. lemon juice (to taste)

pinch of red pepper

½ tsp. salt

Blend well.

Fill plastic ice cube trays with mixture, using rubber spatula to press into cells.

Freeze until solid, then remove individual cubes. Store in the freezer in plastic freezer bag until ready to use.

Defrost as needed.

Serving suggestion: Top black beans and rice with spoonfuls of Cilantro Pesto; garnish with diced tomatoes.

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