

SEAKALE

by Mike Mason

I have never seen seakale on sale in shops anywhere, nor have I seen it on the menu in restaurants. It is in the category of a very rare vegetable. I have seen the odd plant in the odd stately garden but felt it was grown for show rather than as a serious attempt to provide a decent crop. It is quite attractive in a border nevertheless, with leaves somewhat similar to a brassica and beautiful white flowers in late spring.

What is seakale? It is a marine plant found in the wild round our coasts. I know of two other marine vegetables, asparagus and samphire. The latter is found between low water mark and high water mark in tidal estuaries round the Atlantic coast of Europe. However, since high tide does not yet reach Naphill or Walter's Ash I cannot grow samphire on my allotment. So I grow seakale and asparagus. Seakale should not be confused with seakale beet, which is a variety of Swiss chard.

The search for seakale

I had been intrigued by seakale for many years. Year after year I ordered seed from various catalogues but my cheques were returned with the message "crop failure". This only made me more determined. Then, in 1998, I saw in a catalogue that seakale thongs were available. "Thongs?" I hear you cry. "I thought this was an article on gardening!" Let me explain. A seakale thong is a portion of root about half an inch in diameter and about six inches long. The bottom end is cut on the slant and the top horizontal and tiny buds grow from the top end. One plants them vertically with the top just under soil level, about 12 inches apart.

I bought five thongs (variety Lily White) for £1.15 each and one promptly died. One of the survivors grew rapidly in my back garden the first year and produced a mass of white flowers. I decided to allow the plant to form seed so that I could attempt to raise many new plants from seed. At the end of the first year I dug up all four plants and cut some roots off to make my own thongs. I tied the thongs in a bundle and buried them in soil to overwinter and form buds at the top end. The second year I concentrated on propagation whilst allowing the original four plants to grow in size. I had a great deal of difficulty persuading the seakale seed to germinate. It took months and copious amounts of water to soften the hard outer casing of the seed. Many did germinate nevertheless, so they must be self-pollinating and mine must be virtual clones since I know of no other seakale in the area. By year three I had accumulated sufficient plants, via thongs and seed, to plant out a row on the allotment. Now that I have my 37 foot row I have settled into a pattern of cropping half one year and half the following year, to obtain the largest possible plants. The plants are about 12 inches apart in the row.

Growing seakale

A row of seakale takes up a lot of space. The leaves are large and spread out from the row about 30 inches, so the row is about five feet wide. The leaves are quite fragile so one has to take care not to damage them when weeding. Not much weeding is required however since the leaves suppress most weeds. I mulch right up to the crowns with farmyard manure in the spring most years and that also helps to keep the weeds down. Several of my plants burst into flower and, these days, I remove the flower stems when first seen because I want the energy of the plants going into the roots rather than into seed production. My seakale plants do not seem to suffer attack from insects or birds and I am not aware of any disease problems. However, during the blanching process (see below) a few die, so replacement thongs are necessary. The plants grow very vigorously when established and I feel they would grow well in all soil types.

"Which bits does one eat?" you question. One eats young shoots which emerge from the roots in late winter and early spring. However, they have to be blanched otherwise they would be impossibly

bitter. The gardening books show roots in the ground being covered with pots and surrounded by fresh manure for warmth. However, I do not blanch them that way. One would need earthenware pots about 24 inches high and about 12 inches in diameter with a lid. They would cost a fortune to buy and would be at risk on the allotment. So I follow a tip I was given at a gardening talk by someone who used to grow seakale for top restaurants in London. But the method does involve a lot of hard work. However, to obtain a fresh vegetable in March when there is not much else around - and a particularly delicious vegetable at that - the effort is worthwhile.

Blanching

To blanch the seakale one needs many builders' black buckets of about 3 gallons capacity. They cost about £2.00 from builders' merchants. About the turn of the year dig up the roots and place them in the buckets, about two or three to a bucket, fill up with soil and water a little. Where the roots are too big cut some off (and make more thongs from the better cuttings). Place the buckets in a greenhouse with another bucket inverted on top and a thick bin liner over the pair of buckets. This is to exclude all light and make the roots as warm as possible. My greenhouse is unheated but a heated greenhouse or cellar would be better. Take precautions against slugs. About mid March the shoots will be of cutting size – say 6 to 9 inches long. They are pale yellow in colour and look most attractive. There will be individual leaves as well as stems; all are edible. One can keep cropping them for some weeks because growth is now rapid. After cropping, the plants should be returned to the garden or allotment to grow another year, then dug up again the following winter – or the winter-but-one in my case.

I have decided to grow my seakale in the same spot on the allotment, year after year. This is because of two factors. One is that I am generally practising no-dig gardening and want to disturb the rest of the allotment soil as little as possible. The other is that, when lifting the plants, bits of root are unavoidably left in the ground and they then grow like weeds to interfere with other crops if crop rotation is practised. Keeping the seakale in one place seems best.

Cooking and eating

Now for the fun bit – how is seakale cooked and eaten? Rather like asparagus, steam it for five minutes and serve it hot on hot plates with butter spread over. It is really delicious and has similarities in taste to asparagus and samphire. Steamed for five minutes it is still crunchy. I prefer freshly cut seakale (and asparagus and samphire) on their own rather than served as an accompaniment to other foods which would mask their sublime taste. I eat them on their own with bread. The delight is in the fresh taste which can only be obtained by growing your own. Growing your own in general I see as a striving for better quality food, free of artificial chemicals and free of the worry of possible side-effects of artificial chemicals. Good Gardening!

MIKE MASON