

Anyone Growing Longkeepers?

By Al Chomica

A 'longkeeper', I've discovered, is simply any fruit, vegetable or produce one grows that stores well into the winter and perhaps even longer. Back in March, I had the great fortune of bumping into a grower who specializes in growing longkeepers and she became very excited when I offered up some seeds from a rare Winterkeeper watermelon that we grow every year. In return I received three longkeeper tomato seeds of a rare variety. In this discussion I will talk about six different longkeepers that we grow in our gardens in Nanoose. One is an apple, another is a kiwi and the watermelon I mentioned. Then we have that tomato, a kohlrabi and lastly an onion. Let's start with the apple.



I'm told there are better longkeepers than our Spartan apple but we haven't met them yet. The old Dutch variety, Belle de Boskoop, is supposedly the best-tasting longkeeper. BC Fruit Testers claim the best long storage apple is the Newton Pippin, which will keep for almost eight months. But apparently, they don't taste very good unless they spend time in storage first.

We have a seven-year-old Spartan tree that produces well every year and we usually get a bumper crop – except for last year. The apples are big, juicy, sweet and crispy. We store them in the unheated garage in cardboard flats. Each apple is wrapped in a piece of paper so that they don't touch each other, and we eat them fresh or use them as the base for smoothies every day during the winter. They will usually stay fresh and crisp until the New Year. If they go soft we will strain

them and make an applesauce to freeze that is added to smoothies. These store for about 4 to 5 months tops.

The Fuzzy Kiwi is a very good longkeeper although most people don't know it. There are almost 20 varieties of kiwi plants out there but most of them ripen early by late July. We grow three varieties of Fuzzy Kiwi, the Hayward, the Saanichton and the Golden Kiwi. The Hayward is the one you buy in the store although it is the smallest, ripens the slowest and isn't as sweet as the other two. Male and female plants are required for pollination and male plants seem to die off after a year or two so we collect branches of male flowers from the kiwi orchard down the road and hang them around the female flowers in milk containers filled with water. They last for a few days and I have witnessed bees going from the



vase to the female flowers on the vine. We have about 100 kiwis on our female vine this year so this method does work. We pick our kiwis at the onset of frost in the fall and store them in flats for up to six months or longer. When we want fresh kiwis we bring them in the house and leave them in a bowl with an apple for a couple days to sweeten and soften up.



One of our favourite fruits, the Winterkeeper watermelon is also known as the Red-seeded Navajo. We got the seed from a Navajo Indian Reservation in Utah of all places and try to grow them every year. Melons are daunting to grow because they take so long to ripen and usually only sport one melon. They often shrivel up and die overnight and we don't know why but suspect wireworms are the culprits. This year we grew 13 plants but most of them died with undeveloped melons and the rats found one as well. Deer love them. They can get big if the season goes well for them and they get lots of food, heat and sunlight. Most people are amazed when we serve one up with Christmas dinner. I'm guessing they might even last longer but they get eaten by then.

A few years ago I went to Nanoose Edibles just before Christmas when the farm hands were coming in off the fields for lunch. I showed up with a big 13 pounder under my arm and a big knife in my other hand. When we shared it one of the workers said he worked on a melon farm and had never tasted a melon that had so much 'chew' to it . . . firm and sweet for up to three months after picking. Pretty too. Not bad for a melon.

I had never heard of tomatoes being longkeepers other than our San Marzano 3s that might last until Christmas. The tomato seeds I traded for my Winterkeeper melon seeds came from Prairie Garden Seeds in Saskatchewan. They sell two other longkeeper tomatoes and call this one Clare's Tomato because it came from their Aunt Clare. It seems to be similar to something out there called the "Mystery Keeper." We got three seeds and two of them sprouted and are growing well. We have never grown them before so we can't verify the claims but apparently it is an excellent storage tomato and very tasty with a different colour. Plants have dense foliage hiding the abundant fruit production of this variety. The fruit itself is very dense, fairly hefty and slower than most to ripen. I was told when it is finally ripe and cut open the insides are quite red in color, compared to the outside which is often a lighter orange



colour. I was also told it will keep for up to eight months after harvest, allowing one to enjoy fresh tomato fruits until Easter! This is very exciting for us because we love fresh tomatoes yet do not buy them in winter because we find them bland and tasteless.



Brassicas are great plants to grow. Cabbages, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and kale all survive cold winter conditions and can provide lots of flowers to attract bees. We started to grow kohlrabi a few years ago when we got tired of finding slugs within the leaves of our cabbage heads. Last year we tried a new variety that supposedly grows quite large called, Supershmeltz. We grew eight plants that became enormous with the largest achieving an unbelievable 22.5 lbs! They remained sweet and tender until harvest unlike some that get woody.

Perhaps they should be called slowgrowers rather than longkeepers because even though the seed was sown on April 7 it wasn't until September 1 that we pulled the first one that only weighed 5 pounds. We left the rest in the ground and they grew and grew over the winter and we picked them as needed. When it got cold we covered the ground with a leaf mulch. Just before it snowed we covered the remaining ones over with more leaves and just the tips of their leaves were poking up through the snow. We pulled the last 17.5 pounder on April 27, 13 months later. It kept in the fridge two more months as we used it up. Not bad.



Perhaps the true champion of the longkeepers is the Ambition Shallot. We grow many varieties of onions and aim for varieties that are open-pollinated so that we can sow and grow our own seed. Unfortunately, this longkeeper is a hybrid so we must buy seeds every year. Many onions like the Walla Walla only last a few months while the longest storage onions are the big, purple ones that usually last until April. Our strategy after all the other onions are gone is to then bring out the 'big gun' shallots in April that were harvested in July of the previous year and after spending 9 months in storage. They were all firm and fresh without any sprouting

going on and they fed us until August 19 when many of our other onions were ready. So, these champions that were seeded in January had been picked and cured in July of 2017 then stored in a cardboard flat in the garage. They were still fresh when we finally finished them off 13 months later in August of 2018. Now that's my kind of longkeeper...