



Kevin Milaeger

# Milaeger's

## Go Outside---It's Time for Planting!

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**By now you've no doubt** got the urge to plant. Since we are well into April it's time to get busy. Of course you can't plant tomatoes, peppers, and the like. But you can plant many types of onions, radishes, beets, various greens, and more.

If you aren't familiar with the book "A Concise Encyclopedia of Gastronomy" (1952), I suggest you seek it out. It's probably out of print but you can pick up a used copy for a few dollars. It's a fascinating reference book, about 800



**onions just sprouted (L) and ready to harvest (R)**

pages of curious lore. I like the first sentence in the entry for onion: "A native of Asia which has become the most indispensable flavouring agent in cooking all the world over." My kind of book---a bit of history to make gardening even more interesting. Onions are very easy to grow. [Here is a link to our "how-to" poster](#) about growing them. Last year I planted onion sets (marble sized onions that grow into big round onions) on April 1st. I fertilized them once or twice, pulled a few weeds, watered during dry spells, but nothing more. I harvested big beautiful onions in late August. This year I planted the sets a little later; the garden was too wet to plant any earlier. You can pick up a bag of 100 onion sets for



**ramps in situ**

\$1.99, so they're a bargain. I also planted some scallions (table onions, or green onions) from seed. Usually I buy the young plants but I wanted to try a new Japanese variety. The seed packet says to figure 500 seeds for a ten foot row. At four seeds per inch that seems crowded, but maybe germination is less than ideal. I mixed some sugar in with the seed so the seeds won't be too close together. I should be able to start harvesting them by mid-June. I'm going to plant leeks at the end of April. I sowed some leek seed in the greenhouse in early February, and transplanted about 150 of



them to individual cells in early April. Leek harvest will start in September. I also have a modest group of Egyptian onions, potato onions, and shallots. I guess you could say I like onions.



**ramps just picked**

As the above mentioned book notes, the large onions we are all familiar with did originate in Asia. But there are plants in the onion (allium) family that are native to North America, and some right here



**ramps ready to eat**

The most noteworthy is called "ramp" (allium tricoccum.) Like most plants, it has many other common names, including ramps, ramson, and wild leek. The ancient Native American name for the Chicago River is shikaakwa (sounds like Chicago), which was also their word for ramp. It was the place the natives went to collect ramp, no doubt a cherished part of their diet. Perhaps you know someone who owns a woods that hasn't been disturbed too much. You can likely find some ramp there---it is illegal to harvest it from parks and other public lands. Folks who know of a patch aren't likely to tell you about it. Such valuable information is kept secret---not unlike morel mushroom hunters. Ramp is a low growing onion, with broad leaves. It's kind of like a scallion---a skinny onion, very mild in flavor. It is usually harvested in spring; think of

it as a seasonal delicacy. You can dig it out easily. But leave some so that the patch continues to grow for future harvests. If you are having trouble identifying it, just rub a leaf until it "bleeds" a bit, and you will be able to smell the delicious telltale scent.



**radishes planted in rows (L) and in a fun pattern (R)**

Radishes were also on my early April list, so I sowed seed on April 12th. Garden centers don't sell radish plants; they must be grown from seed sown directly in the garden. Don't sow them too thickly. You want the plants about two inches apart for standard radishes.



**Radish Watermelon**

Of course, if you plant them too close you can thin them out after they sprout, and they sprout very quickly. Radishes are a fast crop, ready in as little as three or four weeks. To do that they need frequent watering, but not too much at any one time. We usually have plenty of moisture in spring, but once in a while we have a dry spring, so watch for that. You will probably want to sow another batch of radish seed a couple of weeks after the first, and maybe another batch two weeks after that. When radishes are ready to be harvested, do so all in a few days---they will get woody if left in

the ground too long. That's why you want another fresh batch coming along shortly after the first---so you have a constant supply. I'm growing several kinds of radish: "watermelon" (also called "red meat"), white icicle, a round white variety called 'Ping Pong,' and a traditional red round type. The watermelon radishes are beautiful and your guests will love



seeing them on your table. I've even given radishes as a gift when I was invited to someone's house. I'll admit they were a little perplexed at the non-traditional hostess gift, but they probably still remember it.



**Radish Ping Pong**

You may recall that I had a poor radish crop last year due to root maggots. This year I am covering the plants so that the pretty little butterflies won't lay their eggs on the newly sprouted plants.



**Radish Red Globe**

Keeping my fingers crossed. I also read that wood ashes can help control the maggots. So I dug some ashes out of my fire pit and spread the ashes alongside the radishes. I can't be without homegrown radishes again. One of my favorite childhood memories is of me and my dad making radish sandwiches. White bread, butter, sliced radishes, and salt---delish! (That's what my dad used to say.) I've modified the "recipe" a bit---I use dark rye bread (my grandpa called it "bear bread" for some reason), and fresh ground sea salt and pepper, and different kinds of radishes. Add a glass of beer and you have

a traditional German treat.