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New edibles: colorful, nutritious and delicious

The best new edibles are good-looking enough to hold their own with ornamentals.

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THERE'S URBAN farming, and then there's planting peas among the roses and mounds of potatoes between the dahlias. Gardeners are doing both, growing food for fresh-picked taste and the satisfaction of harvesting health. New information is proving that some varieties of fruit and vegetables contain far more disease-fighting phytonutrients than others.

Plant breeders are responding, and now you can grow purple potatoes and tomatoes as rich in nutrition as in color. Catalogs and websites, such as that of Raintree Nursery in Morton, Lewis County, are listing nutrient values right along with cultural

information for the plants they sell. The best new edibles are delicious, nutritious and good-looking enough to hold their own with ornamentals.

'Siber-frill Siberian' is an heirloom kale, newly available, that keeps producing all year long. Its lacy, blue-green leaves are sweet and tender enough to toss into salads. 'Kosmic Kale,' bred in The Netherlands, has leaves trimmed in white, pretty enough for a garnish, and delicious in soups and stir-fries.

According to the USDA, dark potatoes score as high in antioxidants as Brussels sprouts, kale or spinach. 'All Blue' seed potatoes have deep-blue skins and purple flesh. These flavorful and phytonutrient-dense potatoes are from wholesaler Log House Plants in Oregon, part of its "Purple Power" push toward new varieties packed with nutrition. You'll find 'All Blue' potted up in nurseries and well-suited to grow in containers or straw bales.

'Albion' strawberries, from wholesaler Monrovia Nursery, will be widely available for the first time this spring. Sweet enough for a dessert strawberry, 'Albion' is conical-shaped, disease-resistant and everbearing, which means it continues to fruit through the summer.

It appears we're in for a revolution in basil breeding, starting with 'Bam,' the first Genovese-type basil that puts its energy into producing leaves rather than flowers. Which means it stays bushy and won't bolt well into autumn. Then there's the grafted basil 'Napoletano,' with textured leaves as big as your hand. Think of the pesto! And the 6-inch leaves are large enough to use as sandwich wrappers. Picture sunny garden beds trimmed out in huge, fragrant, wavy leaves of basil. This "blistered leaf" basil has been available only in Naples; now it's being bred here in the Pacific Northwest. The grafted plants grow 3 feet tall, are vigorous and slow to flower.

And how about a tomato, bred at Oregon State University, that's as beautiful as it is full of antioxidants? 'INDIGO Pear Drops' is small, tear-shaped, ripens early, and is perfectly balanced between acid and sweet. Alice Doyle of Log House Plants says "INDIGO tomatoes are the most phytonutrient-dense tomatoes on Earth."

Then there's 'Dancing with the Smurfs,' a near-black cherry tomato that is resistant to late blight. It's bred right here in Everett by Tom Wagner, one of the most prolific tomato breeders in the world. Seems like a good idea to grow tomatoes created by someone who lives in a convergence zone, doesn't it? You can probably count on Wagner-bred tomatoes to ripen no matter what our summer weather brings.

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