

Digging deep for veggies

Root veggies help locavores get through winter months

By WADE MALCOLM
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Central Market vendor Dave Dietz paused after getting dressed one morning last week.

"BUY FRESH, BUY LOCAL," his shirt read.

Shipped in from California and elsewhere, several piles of out-of-town produce sat on his table. He noted his ironic attire.

"It's almost like false advertising this time of year," he joked. "I almost thought to myself, 'I shouldn't wear it.'"

Even as one of the most agriculturally rich areas in the state, February rates as the leanest month of the year in York County for buying local produce, several growers said. But it's not impossible.

"You don't have the selection we have in the spring and fall, but we still have local, fresh leafy greens and potatoes and squash," said Mike Orzolek, a professor of vegetable crops at Penn State. "There's a pretty good selection."

Other than apples, you can forget about buying local fruit. This time of year, the root vegetables rule the farmers' market, so locavores should pull out the roast and stew recipes.

Many potatoes and carrots can keep for months or even a year if stored at the proper temperature (about 50 to 55 degrees) and humidity (75 percent to 80 percent), Orzolek said. Hence, the effectiveness of the old-fashioned root cellar, insulated by the moist ground and kept at constant heat no

matter how cold it gets.

Some farmers opt to go a bit more high-tech. Denny Peters of Peters Produce in Windsor Township has a potato storage cellar below his barn. With only half of the space buried into an embankment, the rest is insulated, and a thermostat kicks a heater on if the temperature in the cellar dips below 40 degrees.

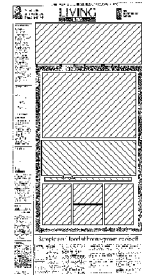
"It may only run a couple of times a day," he said.

With the aid of a temperature-controlled cooler, Dietz still has his own sweet potatoes and shallots — and some squash he purchased from another local farmer — at his York stand. He also offers one of the more challenging crops to grow in the wintertime — arugula.

With the right equipment, several leafy vegetables can thrive in a harsh climate. Dietz grows his arugula in high tunnels, a makeshift greenhouse built over field crops. Plastic sheets trap sunlight during the day, keeping the vegetables warm at night. Heartier leafy greens, such as kale and some types of lettuce, can grow without much trouble. It's also possible — but difficult — to grow spinach and parsley, several growers said.

Some farmers enhance crops' chances of survival by putting down tubes of water between beds in high tunnels. The tubes absorb heat during the day and radiate warmth at night, raising the temperature of the tunnel by eight degrees or more, Orzolek said.

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But despite the opportunity to grow some produce, some farmers simply don't bother with winter crops.

"We work really long hours in the later summer and fall, and in the winter we want some down time," said Jon Weaver-Kreider, owner of Goldfinch Farm in Lower Windsor Township.

But Weaver-Kreider and others have noticed an increased interest in "eating local." If the trend continues, more local farmers might decide the extra work could be worth the added income.

Steve Prescott, owner of Prescott's Patch in Hellam Township, recently surveyed members of his community supported agriculture group to gauge their interest in winter produce.

"There is a growing demand," he said. "But it gets difficult in the wintertime. At some point, you'd have to subsist on beets and turnips."

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Curried vegetable bisque

- 5 cups of tart apple peeled and chopped
- 2 cups chopped onion
- 2 cups red sweet pepper
- 1½ cups carrots
- ¾ cup of celery
- 7 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 3 cups potatoes
- ½ cup raisins
- 3 tablespoons curry powder
- ¾ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ½ tablespoon ground allspice
- ½ teaspoon thyme
- 3 cups milk
- 1¼ cups milk powder
- ⅓ cup tomato sauce
- 2 cups cooked shrimp or chicken
- salt to taste

In a large soup pot, sauté apples, onion, red sweet pepper, carrots and celery in

two teaspoons of oil until vegetables are soft, about seven to 10 minutes. Stir in 3½ cups of broth, potatoes, raisins, curry powder, cardamom, allspice and thyme, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer, stirring as needed, until the potatoes are soft, about 12 to 15 minutes. Purée in batches in blender or food processor. Add some broth if mixture is too thick. For a chunkier soup, do not puree all of the soup. Return everything to the soup pot. Add the other 3½ cups of broth, milk, milk powder and tomato sauce. Heat soup until hot, but do not boil. Stir in chicken or shrimp.

Courtesy of "Simply in Season" by Mary Beth Lind and Cathleen Hockman-Wert, published by Herald Press of Scottdale, Westmoreland County.

Squash with Tomato and Feta Cheese

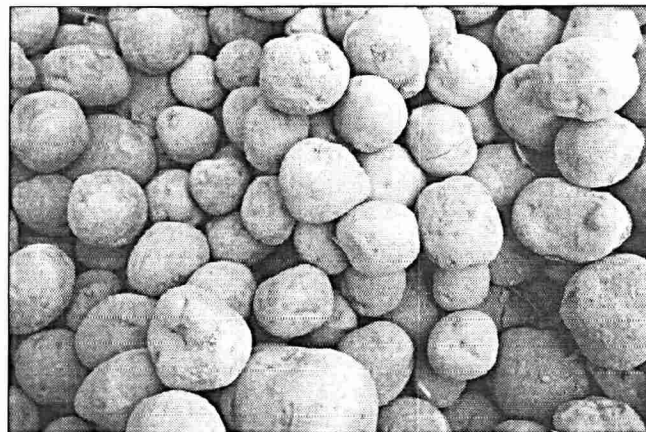
- 2 cups peeled and cubed acorn squash
- 2 eggs
- ⅓ cup heavy cream
- 2 green onions, chopped
- ¼ green bell pepper, diced
- 1 cup dry bread stuffing mix

- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon cracked black peppercorns
- 1 sprig fresh rosemary
- 2 tablespoons crumbled feta cheese
- 2 roma (plum) tomatoes, thinly sliced
- cracked black pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a medium casserole dish. In a steamer basket over boiling water, steam the squash 10 minutes, or until tender. Remove from heat, and mash with a fork. In a medium bowl, blend the eggs and heavy cream. Mix in the squash, three-quarters of the green onions, green bell pepper, dry stuffing mix and parmesan cheese. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer to the prepared casserole dish. Press the rosemary sprig into the center of the mixture. Top with feta cheese, tomato slices and remaining green onions. Season with pepper. Bake 45 minutes in the preheated oven, until lightly browned. Discard rosemary sprig before serving.

From allrecipes.com

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Potatoes are among the vegetables you can find fresh locally this time of year. They store well if kept between 40 and 50 degrees, Denny Peters said.

DELICIOUS IN WINTER

With spring not far away, we can look forward to bunches of local asparagus, spinach and peas. But until then, here are a few veggies still available from local growers:

■ **Root vegetables:** beets, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, rutabagas, sweet potatoes and turnips

■ **Leaf vegetables:** lettuce, arugula and kale

■ **Fruit:** apples

PREZ DOWN ON BEETS

President Barack Obama recently expressed his distaste for at least one winter veggie — beets.

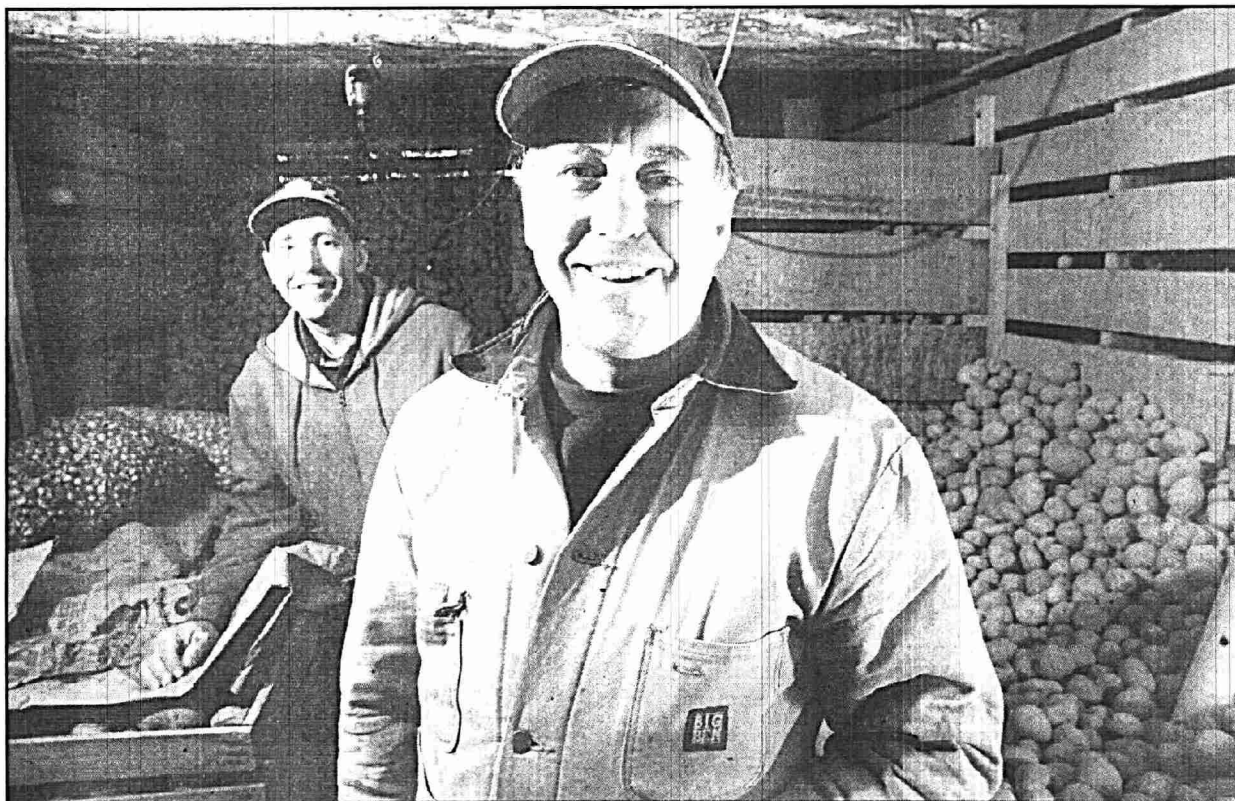
"I always avoid eating them," he told The Associated Press.

Other than being a little tough on one particular root, the 44th president is reported to be a foodie with an adventurous appetite. Some speculate his distaste for beets will take a place in history next to President George H. W. Bush's hatred of

broccoli.

In defense of beets, one recipe Web site, FoodieView, issued a press release, suggesting Obama only needs better preparation of his beets.

"I believe The White House chef, Cristeta Comerford, can easily rectify this situation with tasty recipes that give beets of all colors the credit they deserve," said Howie Wang, the site's founder.



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Brothers Donald Peters, left, and Denny Peters store potatoes in an insulated root cellar in Windsor Township. They sell potatoes even in the coldest months. "It gives you something to do over the winter," Denny said.



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