



I planted potatoes last week. "You did what?" puzzled our daughter after hearing that, probably figuring Mom had really lost her marbles this time. "I'm defying the seasons," I explained. Defiantly. This perhaps-futile venture developed after visiting the ground cellar one recent morning to retrieve a couple of baking potatoes for tossing into the oven with a meatloaf. Along with the fresh bag of russets just purchased, I found another containing about a dozen potatoes bought earlier, wrinkling as they sapped their own moisture, pushing out clusters of pale white sprouts. Clustered around each wrinkling potato were tiny "infants," some of them already the size of the marbles, which I no doubt appeared to be losing. Logical response would have been to pitch the old spuds into the hay field across the road where birds, bugs, and slugs quickly consume anything of nu-

tritive value, while the rest decomposes into organic matter. Sort of an oversized compost pile which never needs turning. Instead, I grabbed the bag of has-beens and headed for the garden. Late summer's damp, dreary, humidity wreaked havoc on all our vining crops, leaving little behind but tangled messes of dead stems and assorted half-matured, half-rotting melons, and squashes. Yanking off a small section of black plastic mulch where the once-thriving butternut squash had gone kaput revealed bare, damp, weedless soil, easily loosened by rooting around a bit with my favorite garden trowel. Years ago, I read in a gardening magazine that potatoes could be grown by simply laying seed sections onto loose soil, then covering with a deep mulch of straw. When the spuds grow to desired size, just remove the straw and pick up the potatoes.

Literally. Well, it sounds worth a try. Straw being a standard commodity here, it took only a few-steps side trip to the barn to grab a half-bale to scatter over the experiment. With potatoes being cool-weather lovers, and straw a great insulator against freezing, perhaps this six or eight minutes of time and a dozen rotting potatoes might yield us some tender, new tater-tidbits before the first snow. Just in time to cook with a Thanksgiving turkey. Deep down, I know the potato venture was just a tactic to delay the dreaded, inevitable day when there is absolutely no usable fresh produce left in the garden. For months, fresh garden goodies have been part of our everyday meals. For us die-hard gardeners, it's always painful to let that go. Other ventures to stave-off gardening withdrawal are scattered here and there, like the single hill of cucumbers, with several fledging pickles being coddled and coaxed on the bank at the dairy barn. Floating row cover tucked around it — day and night — is a cheap, passive way to capture some extra warmth and hopefully, encourage those pickle-lets to grow a few more inches.

A second section of the white, almost weightless fiber-fabric hangs over a pair of late tomato plants thriving in a compost pile of manure and straw outside the calf nursery. Its green tomatoes of varying sizes offer promise of ripening, with a little sunshine, a little luck, and a little less companionship from the kittens using it as a recreation center. Bowing to the inevitable, I followed up the potato planting with an afternoon spent installing a new inner layer of insulating plastic on the greenhouse. If time allows, I'll pot and move in some selected wax begonias and dianthus, hose off all the house plants which summered outside to blast away any bugs, and take as many cuttings of geraniums as possible. More likely, Jack Frost will

suddenly come sneaking over the horizon some early evening, sending me out with a flashlight to drag in what should have been moved in under plastic a few days sooner. While the crew here hastens to harvest tons of cattle feed for the winter — so the "girls" can dine as they've become accustomed to — we two-legged types are again reminded how fortunate we all are that we no longer have to supply our families their winter foodstuffs that same way. And, if we can extend our gardening season and its fresh goodies a few days longer, it's a free bonus. If not, nearby produce markets and grocery centers are but a few moments away. Every year as frost threatens, I'm reminded not to take that luxury for granted.

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