



Notes from Plymouth's RIVER COTTAGE

In this confused climate, Joe Draper wonders whether we still have defined growing seasons for the food that we eat

We all like to have a dig at the British climate, don't we? It's part of our national character. "Typical weather," we say with a wry smile as yet another cloudburst pours down. But just lately, it's got beyond a joke. The relentlessly wet conditions we've endured over the last few years are taking their toll on crops all over Britain. With continuing heavy rain and a distinct lack of sun, we are struggling to grow our fruit and vegetables. This year has been especially difficult here in Devon, with most of our crops off to a slow start and some ruined.

The potato is one of the worst-hit crops because it can't grow in water-saturated soil. The price of spuds has quadrupled in the last year and there's even talk among some farmers of giving up on this crop altogether if bad weather continues.

Then there's the spring veg I've been eagerly waiting for here at the Canteen. Much as I love my winter root vegetables, I look forward to baby carrots, slender asparagus and bunches of fresh herbs. But as I write, it's cold and wet outside.

Looking out at my veg patch, I can just see the tops of my radishes teasing me. But that's all. Normally, I would expect lovely spring greens, early beans and other wonderful spring veg to be abundant.

This wet weather isn't just hampering our fruit and veg, it's also having an effect on the meat and fish we eat. Many lambs have died this year due to the cold, liver disease in cattle (exacerbated by cold, wet weather) has almost become an epidemic, and our fishy friends have been harder to catch in these cold, rough waters.



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Our seasons are undeniably shifting. Just as crops are maturing later than usual, some are growing further into the winter because of later frosts. So, we need to think on our feet. In restaurants that only change their menus quarterly, I've seen foreign produce such as Peruvian asparagus used in May and new potatoes shipped in from the Mediterranean in early summer because of a UK shortage.

I do things differently here at River Cottage, changing my menu twice a day so I can use whatever fresh, local produce comes through the door. This can lead to some surprising choices: I served organic strawberries last November. Some argued they were out of season, but they were beautifully full of flavour and grown down the road, so for me, it made sense. If we stick blindly to traditional seasons without looking at what's available, we'll miss out.

Looking ahead, we need to be flexible. More polytunnels will protect crops from the worst of the elements. We may not want to see our countryside covered in plastic, but we may not have much choice if it continues to rain like this.

Let's make the most of the situation. Warmer winters mean we can enjoy late summer treats such as berries and tomatoes for longer while cool springs aren't a disaster for peas and spinach, who don't like to be too hot. And we should never underestimate the ingenuity of our farmers and plant breeders. Be flexible and keep your eyes open – even if the weather is miserable, you'll always be able to find something good to eat. ■

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