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On the cover:

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Old newspapers can be rolled into seed-starting pots. Photo licensed under CC0.

Editor's letter:

Dear readers,

As Leo Tolstoy wrote in "Anna Karenina," "Spring is the time of plans and projects." This issue of Our Country Home celebrates spring, planning *and* projects.

Barbara Winfield shares lists of home-maintenance tasks that are necessary at this time of year. Whether you choose to tackle them yourself, or hire a handier person for the job, follow Barbara's instructions for a great start to the season.

Once you've taken care of the grubby things, you're likely going to want to spruce up your rooms. Local interior designer Rachel Acevedo has you covered with ideas that won't break the bank. Jude Waterston dishes up a yummy recipe that uses winter root veggies that were stored from last year's late harvest. And Sharon Peduto kicks spring into high gear with helpful advice for both novice and experienced gardeners, as we wait for those first precious blooms to pop from the ground.

Finally, we explore a house in Narrowsburg, NY that epitomizes a minimalist, nature-embracing ethos that, at the same time, is warm and welcoming. A lot of what the

owners have done in this house (open kitchen shelving, transforming a bedroom into a TV room,) is translatable to yours, too.

If you suspect a theme running through these stories—local, helpful, clip-out-able ideas—you're right. We're aiming for content that zeroes in on what we need right here, right now, to help us all live a better life. If you have ideas or feedback, I'd love to hear them. Email me at jane.anderson.sj@gmail.com: I'd love to chat!

Keep that spring in your step,
Jane Anderson, section editor
Our Country Home



Contributed photo Our Country Home editor Jane Anderson has you covered with tips and inspiration for spring.

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Get ready, set... seed

By SHARON PEDUTO

If you're a beginner gardener, and live in a moderate growing zone such as 5 or 6—as we do here—you're about to learn what experienced gardeners have found throughout the years: our growing seasons are shorter, so plants need a head start.

The longer it takes a plant to produce, the earlier you need to plant seeds. In general, seeds with a long germination time need to be sowed indoors, six to eight weeks before the last frost.

This is the time of year to begin growing your seeds indoors. If you haven't started, you could still have time.

Read your seed packages carefully for different times of germination. Sowing indoors too soon can create "leggy" plants, which are not healthy. According to experienced gardeners in these zones, don't plant your seedlings outside before Memorial Day.

For indoor planting, you'll need seed soil (less dense than potting soil or gardening soil). This allows tender roots to grasp water and spread their roots.

What you'll need

Containers. They can be anything in which you can poke holes in the bottom, from egg cartons to plastic containers. Be aware that you might need to transplant seedlings to larger containers as they grow, before transplanting outdoors, so starting with larger containers is always a good idea. Poke holes in the bottom of each container. Small containers like egg-carton cups get one hole; larger containers could have as many as four. Label the containers with a permanent marker. (See also, Rules of green thumb, page 7.)

A pan with a lip, in which to set your containers. A spray bottle to spritz the top of germinating seeds, so they aren't drowned by overwatering. **- Page 7**



Photo by Joshua Lanzarini on Unsplash

Seedlings require a little care indoors.



Start your seeds

There's still some time!

If you want to start seeds indoors, you can experiment with a few plants. Here are some suggestions, courtesy of Cornell Cooperative Extension in Monroe County, NY. All dates are approximate—when in doubt, contact your local cooperative extension: Cornell Cooperative Extension in Sullivan County, NY 845/292-6180; Penn State Cooperative Extension in Pike County, PA 570/296-3400; and Penn State Cooperative Extension in Wayne County, PA 570/253-5970, ext. 4110.

Plant	Start seeding	Set out
Basil	April 10	May 26
Broccoli	March 24	May 4
Cabbage	March 24	April 21
Cucumbers	April 28	May 26
Eggplant	March 24	June 2
Pumpkin	May 5	June 2
Squash	May 5	June 2
Swiss chard	March 24	May 5
Tomatoes	March 31	May 26

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Now's the time to put seeds in dirt. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en.

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SEED - Page 5

Start seeding

Plant your seeds in the seed soil according to the instructions on the packet. Set containers in the pan, add about 1/4 inch of water to the pan. That's called bottom watering; the seed will soak the water up through those holes in the bottom of the containers. Bottom water the seeds with approximately 1/4 inch of water per day.

You'll also need to spritz the seeds daily so they'll sprout. They should never get dry.

Place plastic wrap over containers to maintain moisture and heat.

Darkness, and a minimum of 12 hours per day of light, are necessary. Find your sunniest room and place the pan there.

Rotate your pan every day. If you are a beginner, you'll notice your seedlings will bend towards the sun if the pan is not rotated. You want straight, proud plants to transplant outdoors, hence the rotation.

If you do not have enough sunlight, use an overhead light positioned eight to 12 inches above the seeds.

Start these seeds inside

What to plant indoors? According to "The Old Farmer's Almanac," "broccoli, Brussel sprouts, cabbage, tomatoes,... cauliflower, celery, eggplant, and peppers" are planted indoors because their roots develop slowly. Herbs such as basil, dill, flat-leaf parsley, oregano and lemon balm are easy to grow indoors. They need extra time to grow to fruition—the best time to use in your recipes.

Marigolds—blooming flowers—make great companions, along with your fruits and vegetables. It is often said that they keep some unwanted insects away. They are beautiful, and come in an array of colors and sizes.

As your seeds grow, find the heartiest seedling in each container, and snip away the others with a small scissor.

And finally—

The last thing you'll definitely need when indoor sowing is patience. Waiting for



Ronggy at Chinese Wikipedia, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons
It's fun to shop for seeds when planning your garden.

seeds to germinate can feel like an eternity. Use that time to work your garden soil. Take some dirt to the Cooperative Extension and have it analyzed. Find out what you need to add to your soil. Begin spacing rows, building mounds. Get your mulch.

According to experienced gardeners in zones 5 and 6, don't plant your seedlings before Memorial Day unless they are cool-tolerant. Lettuces and Swiss chard enjoy cooler weather. They can be planted in late spring to early summer. Tomatoes like warmth, plenty of sun and room to grow. There is nothing like a fresh tomato pulled out of your garden, sliced on top of mozzarella with basil and a little olive oil. To die for.

What to grow directly in the ground, better known as direct sowing? Root vegetables such as carrots, beets, potatoes and radishes do well with direct sowing. Hard-shell seeds such as sunflowers, beans and winter squash need water to soften them and each shell scored, as well as a change of temperatures. If left outdoors inside their packages or wrapped in paper towels and placed inside plastic recloseable bags, they will germinate without the hassle of soaking and scoring each individual seed.

If you want your children to eat vegetables, it's best to have them help grow, water and pick them right off the vine or out of the ground. There is nothing sweeter than fresh corn, nothing more tender than home-grown string beans, or more juicy than a tomato pulled from a plant. Once you've grown your own, you will never want store-bought produce again.

Rules of green thumb: extra tips

- The larger the seeds, the larger the container. For example, zucchini, squash, pumpkins and melons have large seeds. You'll be glad you used a large container for these babies.
- Plant 3 to 4 seeds per container.

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- ☞ Know where your food comes from.
- ☞ Shop at farmers markets.
- ☞ When farmers markets are not in season, shop the perimeter of the grocery store for produce, dairy and fresh foods.
- ☞ Buy fewer packaged foods.



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FIVE WAYS

to start loving your home now

(Without breaking the bank)

By RACHEL ACEVEDO

Do you ever find yourself looking around your home and the overwhelm sets in? You hate the kitchen, the living room is a mess of toys, and items are overflowing from the nonexistent entryway.



Maybe your space just lacks character and you don't see how to improve it without a major overhaul?

I feel your pain. I've been there; I still visit there from time to time, despite being a designer who knows that major overhauls are not the only answer. In fact, there are a number of small changes you can make quickly and with a small budget to drastically improve your home and—more importantly—how you feel in it. Let's jump right in.

Update your hardware

Maybe you don't need a brand-new dresser or kitchen cabinetry—maybe what you need are some handles that aren't from 1980. Seriously, don't underestimate how much of a facelift an older piece can get from simply swapping out the hardware for a more contemporary option. Updated hardware adds visual interest and can completely change the age of a piece, taking your existing furniture from outdated to upscale. I've used this trick to update outdated bathroom vanities, dressers and kitchen cabinetry.

Before you purchase the first new handle or knob you come across, make sure to measure your current hardware and the space between drill holes to ensure the replacement will transfer seamlessly. Keep a sanding block on hand in case the old hardware has left any indentations behind.

Wood putty can fill an extra drill hole, but keep in mind you'll need replacement paint or stain as well.

Some of my favorite places to source hardware with beautiful artistry and quality are Etsy, Rejuvenation, and Anthropologie Home.

Change your light fixtures

Light fixtures are having a moment right now, and I couldn't agree more. Lighting can change EVERYTHING. I'm not joking.

It's not just the beauty, visual interest, and personality that a stunning light fixture can bring into a space—it's literal light. Look up: Do you have a standard flush mount on your ceiling, with the lightbulbs encased by murky white glass or something similar?

They not only lack all sense of personality, but they block out a TON of light. The result? A dimly lit space that feels gloomy and probably tires you out (not to mention the look of it is drab).

By replacing this type of lighting with a pendant or chandelier that drops down from the ceiling, you not only expose the bulb, immediately adding more light to the space, but you instantly add character and interest to a level of your home (aka the ceiling) that sometimes gets forgotten about.

When you walk into a space, and thoughtful design has taken place from floor to ceiling, it hits differently, trust me. A simple light fixture replacement has the potential to uplift your mood, increase your



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Pendant lighting exposes the room to more light and brightens the space.



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FIVE WAYS ~ Page 9

energy and productivity, and round out the design of the room—or take center stage. IKEA and Home Depot are great places to find affordable light fixtures and pendant kits. For really unique fixtures, Rejuvenation and West Elm are my go-to's.

Put those walls to use!

If I had a nickel for every home that relegated its walls to vast spaces of emptiness save for a lone “Live Laugh Love” plaque or singular family photo—I would be happily retired. USE. THOSE. WALLS. Here's how:

Storage: Add decorative hooks or a larger furniture piece like a tall cabinet for practical storage space and visual interest.

Artwork: Have fun with this and tend towards the “more is better” end of the spectrum. Artwork should speak to you and about you, and it doesn't have to cost a million dollars. It doesn't have to all be the same size, frame color or material either. What it should do is contribute or add to the color scheme and design style in a thoughtful way. My favorite places to source artwork are Minted and local thrift stores/galleries!

Mirrors and sconces: Want to turn the ambiance up full blast? A beautiful mirror framed by wall sconces is a must. Mirrors are multifunctional—they give the illusion of having more space by bouncing light around the room, act as a stand-alone art piece, and of course, give you an opportunity for a quick hair check before heading out the door. Wall sconces add ambient lighting, which serves to round out a room design and set a real MOOD. Better yet? There are a number of battery-powered wall sconce options that don't require new electrical work—check out Amazon for some steals.

Invest in bedding

My bed is my favorite place in my house. Why? Because I've invested (modestly) in making it the most comfortable oasis it can possibly be. The trick? Add layers of plushness. I won't tell you to buy 16 pillows for your bed—it might look pretty in pictures, but is a practical storage nightmare. But maybe four pillows? Something to sleep on and something to prop you up while enjoying some tea and a good book.

Then just add a down comforter with a duvet. This is a game-changer. Down comforters (or down alternatives) add volume (like a cloud) and weight (for a feeling of total calm and security) without adding a ton of heat. The ability of down comforters to regulate body temperature is amazing; honestly, if you do nothing else, do this, because your sleep affects your whole life.

Add a duvet cover (and get the matching shams for those extra pillows!) to add a bit more weight, and to tie in the color scheme of your bedroom.

My recommendation is to keep the duvet either light and neutral or dark but earthy (i.e., soft grays, sage greens, warm taupes). You can always add a splash of color in the form of decorative pillows and throws, and swap these out as the seasons change without breaking the bank on a new duvet cover.

Lastly, add your favorite throw or quilt to



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A colorful duvet keeps a down comforter clean from dirt (and fur).

the bottom of the bed as your final layer of BLISS. These changes not only drastically improve your comfort and ability to sink into bed at night, but they visually elevate your bedroom for a more inviting and complete space.

Don't underestimate the power of paint

Take a second look at those kitchen cabinets. Do you hate them as much as you say, or do you hate the orange pine finish? (And maybe the hardware? See the first tip!)

In a world of massive home renovations on Instagram and stunning Pinterest boards, the power of paint has been lost. This is one of the most affordable ways to dramatically improve your space.

First, decide how you want to feel in your space. Yes, feel. Do you want to feel uplifted, energized, and ready for the day? Cool and light colors will give you some pep in your step. Looking to feel grounded and calm? Neutrals with brown undertones and earth tones are the way to go. Sophisticated and bold? Darker, moodier colors in both earth tones and jewel tones can set the stage. The list goes on.

Paint is powerful, but looks different online, on the swatch, and on your walls, from home to home and room to room. As such, be sure to always test colors on your walls. And if you're going to change your lighting, do this first; the shift in lighting will affect the cast on your walls.

So, there you have it! Improving your home doesn't have to be daunting. You can start feeling better about your space right away, without breaking the bank with these simple and DIY-friendly changes.



Photo by Ken Doerr on Flickr Licensed under CC 2.0. www.flickr.com/photos/kendoerr/5689038664
Sconces and mirrors are functional and beautiful.

Rachel Acevedo is a Hawley-based interior designer who combines interior design with life design. Rachel believes that the right surroundings can transform your mindset and your life, allowing you to achieve growth mentally, emotionally and physically. She is committed to curating a design process for each client that helps them live their most elevated life.



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Spring cleaning 101

By BARBARA WINFIELD

Warm sun, fresh air and the early blooms of crocus and forsythia are the sure signs of spring. It's a great time to take advantage of mild temperatures, freshen up the house, and tackle spring cleaning inside and out.

Here are some suggestions to help get you started.

Check out your local hardware store or home center for information on renting tools. Although many of the tasks can be do-it-yourself projects, consider hiring professionals for heavy-duty chores, such as washing windows and repairing roofs.

For large cleanups, call a local sanitation company about renting a dumpster to haul away rubbish.

Outside:

Check your roof, siding and sidewalks for winter damage.

Make sure that outdoor wiring and outlets are working.

Inspect outdoor and indoor foundations on your house and outbuildings for cracks or severe settling.

Make sure garden tools and motorized lawn equipment are in working order. Don't forget to examine the tires on lawnmowers and wheelbarrows.

Survey fences and stone walls for animal- and weather-related damage.

Clean and repair birdhouses.

Remove and clean storm windows.

Clean and install window and door screens.

Inspect outdoor planters for winter damage.

Examine outdoor lights to make sure they are working.

Pick up twigs and branches.

Inspect, clean and repair gutters. Consider hiring someone for this.

Inside:

Take down heavy drapery and replace with curtains.

Wash windows.

Take an inventory of household cleansers and buy more if needed; replace your vacuum cleaner bags.

Clean your floors, carpets and rugs. Use cleaning products for the type of flooring you have.

Dust woodwork and moldings in every room.

Prepare closets for storage of winter clothing and linens.

Clean your kitchen stove and refrigerator.

Test your water. Have your water professionally tested at least once a year, if possible.

Make sure all faucets (including any in the basement) are not leaking.

Check your basement dehumidifiers and sump pump to see if they are in working order.

Test smoke detectors and check fire extinguishers to see if they are up to date and properly working.

Clean out the attic or crawl space, check for insect or rodent infestation, and look for leaks from the roof or chimney.



Photo by the Centers for Disease Control

Fresh air inspires you to clean up.



Photo by Pawel Wiecek, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Spring cleaning isn't just for humans. Here, a Eurasian nuthatch removes debris from a nesting hole in preparation for nesting season.

Hiring professional cleaning help

If you are considering hiring a cleaning service for a one-time job—or on a regular basis—here are some suggestions to get you started.

Always request references, and be sure to ask for the phone numbers of at least two customers. Ask about reliability, honesty and the care the cleaners show in their work.

Get an estimate in writing. Ensure you know if you are being charged by the hour or the job. And find out when payment is due.

Find out what work is included—some cleaners won't do windows or stoves. What would be considered extra work?

Do the cleaners bring their own supplies? Do they use environmentally safe ingredients?

Does the cleaner/service have a break/damage policy? Is the cleaner or company insured and bonded? Make sure you see the paperwork.

When hiring a service, get the names of the cleaners that will be doing the job. Will you have the same cleaners each time?

Ask around, and check with your Better Business Bureau for complaints against the company.

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Stone Hill's tapestry of light



Photos by Catskill Image, used with permission

By JANE ANDERSON

There's a certain poetry in light, and Stone Hill, a beautifully constructed home in the meadows of Narrowsburg, NY, captures it perfectly.

Set on 26 rolling acres, Stone Hill is tucked off the road behind a grove of evergreens. The winding driveway leads you right behind those trees, where the front of the house opens up to you. Sheathed in warm pine siding, the house is topped with a black, standing-seam metal, shed-style roof. Black trim accents the windows here, too—adding to the sophistication of the structure. A bluestone path leads to the 2,008-square-foot house.

The front glass door opens into a bright foyer. A sidelight window, accompanied by windows on either side of the foyer vestibule, lets sunlight pour in. The floor is easy-to-maintain slate, and the ceiling is made from planks of that lustrous pine. White walls contrast nicely with the dark slate and black trim for an easy-on-the-eyes minimalism.

You won't linger long in the foyer, beyond shedding your shoes, because a spectacular view beckons. The house opens up into a great room encompassing the kitchen, dining and living areas, but the main attraction is the far wall: A concrete-faced, woodburning fireplace climbs to the ceiling, flanked by two big pairs of sliding glass doors that open to an expansive deck. Those doors are topped with Pella Architect Series clerestory windows that are several feet tall. All that glass allows a picture-perfect, bucolic view of woods, rolling hills and vast meadows. When the sun sets, recessed lighting in the ceiling combines with a stark, black chandelier in the living room and big, black dome pendants in the kitchen.

The roofline of the house rises from about 12 feet in the foyer to a maximum of 15 feet at the fireplace end of the room. The ceiling is pine planking, crossed by white ceiling beams; the wood theme is continued on the solid white oak floors. The walls are painted in an uncomplicated white—because why would you want to distract from that view? Although the room is high-ceilinged and expansive, it doesn't veer toward the obnoxiously large great rooms of the 1990s. There's room here for a comfortable sectional sofa, and the oak dining table shares space with the kitchen's center island (the listing says the table, which seats four, can expand to fit eight).

The kitchen is simply gorgeous. Marbled quartzite countertops sit on deep black cabinetry that has gold-tone hardware. The center island, too, shares that scheme and has cupboards on two sides for lots of storage. A gleaming subway-tile backsplash rises from the countertop to the first of two levels of open oak shelving (which matches the fireplace mantel, in a clever use of design). Chefs will feel right at home here: The kitchen sports a Bertazzoni six-burner gas range, and a French-door refrigerator and dishwasher from Bosch.

A half-bath is unobtrusively snuggled into a space between the foyer and the kitchen. Although it's a petite space, this powder room hasn't been ignored by the designers. A marble backsplash in dramatic shades of gray, black, and brown rises behind the vessel sink, with a wall-mounted tap adding to the minimalist air.

Back in the great room, a door near the sliders opens to the primary suite. Big enough for a king bed, this room, too, is soaked in the light offered by a wall of glass, compliments of a set of deck-access sliders flanked by static glass walls and topped with clerestory windows. Like the rest of the house, the primary bedroom has an oak floor, pine ceiling and white walls. A walk-in closet is on one side of the bed wall, and the ensuite bath is on the other.

The bath has a black slate floor and a gray, double-sink vanity with a marble countertop. A column of open shelving allows room for linen storage next to the vanity. Large, barn-sliding glass doors shield a huge, marble, walk-in shower. It's got a black rain shower overhead, and a hand shower on the wall. Clever recesses in the wall give space for toiletries, and a bench is built into one side.

On the opposite side of the house from the primary suite, a hall leads to the bedroom wing. Two bedrooms share the same decor of pine floors and white walls, with double sliding windows topped by clerestory windows.

The back bedroom is currently used as an entertainment/TV room. It's painted a moody blue/black that's highlighted by a wide clerestory window and the same slider/clerestory combo as elsewhere in the house. Like the other bedrooms, this has a modern chandelier for after-dark illumination. The sliders open to a bluestone patio and, of course, that view. **— Page 17**



This secondary bedroom is cozy and boasts a modern chandelier.

Stone Hill: 231 Schalck Road, Narrowsburg
\$845,000

Listed by: Country House Realty, Inc.
(an offer has been accepted)

Bedrooms: 4

Bathrooms: 2.5

Square feet: 2,008

Acres: 26.48

Built: 2020

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STONE HILL - Page 15

The hall bath has a wide, single-sink vanity that's nearly identical to the primary ensuite's vanity. But the floor/wall scheme is a yin/yang to its counterpart: Here, a large soaking tub/shower combo is lined with dark slate subway tile, and the floors are white, hex-shaped ceramic tile. This bathroom is big and airy, easy for more than one family member to share.

A laundry room finishes out this end of the house. It's got a washer and dryer from LG, topped with an oak clothes-folding table. A work sink in here takes the messy jobs out of the kitchen and baths.

Out back, the deck has more than enough room for a crowd. Uncluttered by railings, the ground-level deck slides its way across the back length of the house, jutting into a dining deck off the living room before ending at the bluestone patio and a dedicated firepit. Wherever you sit, you get an eyeful of that magnificent view. If looking isn't enough, head to the treeline, where you'll find a mile of trails and a burbling brook. A hot tub and outdoor shower are two bonuses here.

A detached, two-car garage measures 440 square feet for storage and weather protection. Although the home is on a huge plot of land, it's still just a 13-minute drive to Narrowsburg and a delicious coffee at Tusten Cup, or 15 minutes to arts and culture at Bethel Woods Center for the Arts. Built in 2020, the house has settled into its environs, and the lucky new owner will find a turnkey paradise.



The great room has a wall of windows and sliders with a magnificent view. The open-concept living/dining/kitchen is comfortable and not overly big.

Photos by Catskill Image, used with permission



The fourth bedroom is currently used as an entertainment/TV room. It's got moody, blue-black walls and room for a sofa, chairs and tables.



With pine ceiling accents and white walls, the house was designed with a beautiful minimalism.

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Sweet, sweet winter



RR photos by Jude Waterston

No matter how you garnish it, sweet potato soup is warm and comforting in late-winter cold.

By JUDE WATERSTON

It sure is winter. The snow, when first falling in thick, wet, pristine flakes, is stunning and magical to see. And imagining a cognac snifter warming in my hand as I stand by the fireplace we don't have can be a pleasure; otherwise, winter is my least favorite season of the year.

It's interesting to explore the changes in how (and what) we cook as each season rolls in. For most of the year, farmers' markets dictate what we prepare, and hopefully set our imaginations flying.

There are more than a dozen farmers' markets in Sullivan County. Some are large and bustling, like the Callicoon and Narrowsburg markets, where many vendors gather to sell bread and pastries, soap, local honey, homemade cheese, flowers and plants, wine, liquor and—most important—produce of every variety. The vast selection of fruits and vegetables is a lovely thing to behold.

Other farmers' markets are small Mom and Pop venues, selling just what they grow on their own property. At least one market is open every day of the week from early spring through the summer/fall, providing myriad options for both weekenders and long-time locals.

Whether you live near or pass through Roscoe, Callicoon, Barryville, Kauneonga Lake, Liberty, Pine Bush or Narrowsburg—to name a few—there is a market where you can stop and pick up that season's freshly grown and picked fare.

But when we are in the thick of winter, we depend upon local groceries or what we've managed to store from our fall harvests. Potatoes, parsnips, turnips, sweet potatoes and carrots make their appear-

ances at the supermarket, as do some sturdy winter greens such as chard, kale and collards, leeks and green and purple cabbages.

Yes, it's cold and damp in the house, but just the scent of food on the stovetop or baking in the oven is warming.

My favorite dish to make this time of year is oven-roasted vegetables, whether root or in the *Cruciferae* family—meaning cauliflower and broccoli. Drizzled with good, fruity extra-virgin olive oil and seasoned vigorously with flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, the natural sugars in the vegetables caramelize and their flavor deepens substantially.

And now it comes time for full disclosure. It's cold, windy and icy at home in Sullivan County as of this writing, but my Country Home is currently far away. It's winter as well where I am in Oaxaca, Mexico. When we awaken (and, later, head to bed), it's quite cool, in the low to mid-50s. By mid-day, the temps hover around the low 80s, and the sun is plentiful.

Oaxaca has plenty of farmers' markets, both outdoors on certain days of the week and indoors daily. The variety of fruits and vegetables—some known and others to be discovered—is staggering, and I like nothing better than to walk among the booths searching for the perfect avocado or mango. Quite a few vendors recognize me now and point me to, or hand me, what they know I have come to purchase often and in what state I want it. I know their



Sweet potatoes in Oaxaca, Mexico.

prices are fair (and mind-bogglingly low) and they know to write down the total for me on a slip of paper because my Spanish is muy malo (that is, bad).

I will add that a handful of the fruit and vegetable sellers, in an attempt to cater to the many outsiders visiting at this time of year, import a few items not readily available in Mexico. You can find Granny Smith apples, prewashed lettuce and other greens in plastic bags, and even navel oranges from Florida. Why you would purchase the last I don't understand, as the oranges and mandarins in Oaxaca are as juicy, sweet and tasty as could be.

Yesterday I went in search of sweet potatoes. I had soup in mind. Whether you are living upstate or in the city, you can find sweet potatoes at both farmers' markets and supermarkets this time of year. Here, they are available in orange, which we're all used to, but also in deep purple. Sometimes the purple ones are regular potatoes and other times they are sweet. You can find out by scraping off a tiny bit of skin to reveal the color beneath. I picked up two of each color; all four of them large and twisted, looking just a little bit like alien vegetables.

Cooking and eating are universal. They do some things differently here in Oaxaca, particularly in their use of local herbs and spices, but I have found we have a common ground in that we all want to eat well, heartily, and hopefully with a few good friends.

Sweet potato soup with ginger, leeks and apple

Serves 6 as a first course

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 leeks, white and palest green parts only, halved lengthwise, cleaned and sliced thinly

2 1/2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and diced

1 pound (about 3) Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored and cut into small cubes

3 teaspoons peeled and grated fresh ginger

5 cups of water

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

Salt to taste

Garnishes: Fresh lime juice, finely chopped fresh cilantro, slivered toasted almonds and a sprinkling of fruity chili powder, such as ancho

Heat the butter in a Dutch oven or soup pot over medium heat. Add the leeks and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft, about 5 minutes. Add the ginger and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the ground cinnamon and cumin, and stir to combine. Add the sweet potatoes, apples and water, and bring the mixture to a simmer. Add salt to taste, reduce heat, cover the pot, and cook at a low simmer for about 45 minutes, until the vegetables are soft.

Puree the soup in batches in a blender, being careful not to blend too much at a time. Alternatively, you can use a handheld immersion blender. The soup should be very smooth.

Return the soup to the pot and heat gently.

Ladle the soup into individual soup bowls. Squeeze a little fresh lime juice into each bowl, garnish with cilantro and/or slivered toasted almonds, and sprinkle with a bit of ancho chili powder. Serve.



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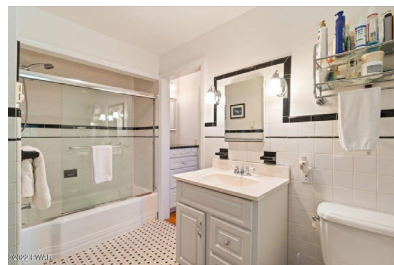
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