

# RCCCG NEWS

## March 2026 RCCG Newsletter

### *RCCG Contact Information*

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### *2026 Important Dates*

**Saturday, March 7, 12-2pm**

Spring Garden meeting

**Saturday, April 11**

Spring Clean-up

**May 1 -**

Garden must be started

**Sunday, May 3**

First Inspection



## President's Message

Happy Spring fellow gardeners,

We look forward to seeing you at the Spring meeting on March 7, 2026. We are excited for our new gardeners and our returning gardeners. We have one minor rule change or clarification. If there is any message, I want to emphasize it is to be kind and respectfully to one another in and outside the garden. It's common sense but sometimes situations and tempers can make it hard. Looking forward to starting. Every season is a learning something new about gardening and

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sometimes about ourselves. I know each year I start with goals and end up with realities and sometimes good surprises. One piece of advice, if you have something in your garden that you aren't sure of, let it grow a bit. Not so much that if it is bad that it establishes or proliferates, but if is something that wasn't in your garden plan...just be flexible and let it grow. You may get a crop or a flower that you hadn't expected. Please of course temper this with having an understanding and aggressive goal versus pernicious and invasive weeds. If you have questions or need advice there are many to ask. Your fellow gardeners are a voluminous source of information and advice.

Lastly as I've said many times, our garden runs on volunteers. Please sign up to volunteer on something that fits your situation and skillsets. Once you sign up, please follow through on your commitments and keep in communication if any situation comes up which changes your ability to do so. In the best case if your first plan doesn't work, please try to contribute in another way. In the worst case just like in each new season gardening we try to be better, make a plan to do better next season.

Again, happy Spring, hope you are well and have a wonderful gardening season.

#### New RCCG emails

[Garden@rockcreekgarden.org](mailto:Garden@rockcreekgarden.org) or  
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## Enriching Our Mental Health and Physical Well-being Through Gardening

### The Role of Nature in Wellness

By Yvonne Davis Smith

In today's fast-paced world, many of us struggle to find balance between mental health and physical well-being. Connecting with nature has proven benefits for both aspects of health. As a seasoned member of our wonderful Rock Creek Community Garden, I have found this experience to be a treasured urban oasis, that offers an ideal setting for activities that nurture mind and body. Among these, gardening stands out as a powerful, accessible practice that encourages mindfulness, movement, and connection.

#### *Gardening: A Pathway to Mental Health*

Gardening is more than a hobby, it is a therapeutic activity that reduces stress, anxiety, and depression. The act of tending to plants, whether flowers or vegetables, allows individuals to focus on the present moment. The sensory experience of touching soil, smelling herbs, and observing growth encourages mindfulness, a proven strategy for improving mental health. In Rock Creek Park, the sounds of birds and rustling leaves further enhance this calming effect, offering a tranquil environment for those of us seeking respite from daily pressures.

### *Physical Benefits of Gardening*

Gardening is a gentle form of exercise that promotes flexibility, strength, and cardiovascular health. Activities such as digging, planting, watering, and harvesting engage a variety of muscle groups and encourage movement. In Rock Creek Park, the expansive green spaces provide ample room for community gardens and individual plots, ensuring that we can safely and comfortably work outdoors. Working in this space of gardening can also help regulate our blood pressure, improve sleep, and boost immunity.

### *Community Connections and Social Support*

Participating in gardening projects within Rock Creek Park fosters a sense of community. Through shared goals and teamwork, we build relationships and social support networks. These connections are vital for mental health, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting belonging. Our garden provides a nurturing environment for sharing ideas, healthy vegetables, volunteering, and educational projects, making it easy for people of all ages and backgrounds to get involved and benefit from collective engagement.

### *Environmental Stewardship and Personal Growth*

Gardening in Rock Creek Park also encourages environmental stewardship. By cultivating native plants, we support local wildlife and live with a few lily weeds, this contributes to conservation efforts. The process of nurturing a garden builds patience, responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment. Watching seeds grow into mature plants provides tangible evidence of progress, inspiring confidence and personal growth.

### *To Get Started in Rock Creek Park and our Rock Creek Community*

- ✦ **Join a Garden Activity:** Research local food desserts that may require us to share our bounty from our gardens. We can share our plots, tools, and guidance with newcomers.
- ✦ **Attend Workshops:** We can share information and tips for educational sessions on sustainable gardening, native plants, or mindfulness in nature.
- ✦ **Volunteer:** Contribute our time to garden beautification projects or plantings, which help maintain the garden and foster a deeper sense of purpose.
- ✦ **Practice Mindful Gardening:** Pay attention to your senses and practice gratitude for the natural world during each gardening session. The Harvard Medical School Residency Project is a must read, a perfect example of developing and maintaining a positive attitude, while studying in the forest.
- ✦ **Explore New Interests:** Try growing herbs, vegetables, or flowers that you've never planted before, and share your harvest with others.
- ✦ **Above all Share your wonderful sense of heritage and love with others.**

### *Conclusion*

Gardening offers a unique opportunity to enrich both mental health and physical well-being. By engaging in this restorative practice, we nurture ourselves, connect with others, and contribute to a healthier environment.

Best Wishes for a Productive and Bountiful Season....

# Spring Garden! Tilling or no Tilling

By Anita Albertson

The Winter has been hard and the Spring is anticipated with every cell in my being! Each year I feel I am learning new things and I find myself experimenting anew. There are many ways to start a garden, and here I offer one or two ways.

There is a lot of information about tilling and no-tilling – they each have different advantages.

No-tilling is the idea that you only disturb the soil right where you are planting so as not to disturb the seed bed and awaken the hidden weeds and volunteers whose seeds rest in the dirt. Seeds from previous plantings, seeds brought from mice and voles, birds and the wind into your garden. If you work only where you place the seed or plant that you want, the weeds should be less. By mulching you keep additional weeds at bay and also with the right mulch (like leaves and straw) you also serve to protect the moisture and temperature of the tender young plant.

Tilling is working the soil in the bed that you plan to work down to about a foot. By working the soil, one might disturb the seed bed of some weeds, but one is breaking the soil to make it easier for roots to take hold and gather water and nutrients. This is especially important when there is thick clay still in the soil. Too much clay and the plants can't push their roots through and grow – too little clay and the soil dries out too quickly. Working the soil mixes the components of the soil into a blended mix of nutrients and textures. I would still encourage the use of mulch to protect the plants/seeds -hold moisture and block the sun from any unwanted weed plants.

If you choose to have paths in your garden, using brown cardboard or heavier woodchip mulch can also keep down unwanted weeds and feed your worms and absorb/hold some moisture. Woodchips are denser and pull some of the nitrogen from the soil as they break down – which is why nearer your plants you want to use lighter mulch like leaves or straw. Cardboard can be useful – but you want cardboard without shiny surfaces, and you want to remove all staples. There is some recent concern that some cardboard might have plastics in them. While many inks used on local newspapers and cardboard are made of soy – it is useful to be sure that what you use in your garden is not introducing anything problematic. Covering with plastic cloth is problematic for a couple of reasons – first it introduces plastics into your garden (which should be organic because we are on park lands) – and it blocks the sun and rain from getting to the soil which kills off the beneficial microorganisms which help your plants grow.

Weeds are things you don't want where they are. There will always be weeds – and not all weeds are bad – they can offer nutrients or shade and many of the early ones are edible – do your research – purslane and lamb's quarter for example are delicious and nutritious.

Invasive weeds are more problematic. Not all weeds show up first thing in Spring. *Pinellia Ternata* (what we call lily weed) doesn't come out until the soil warms up – so you might clear your plot of chickweed only to find the lily weed thriving come June.

# Poetry Corner

## Resetting

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A Prose Poem to Celebrate Pre-Season Gardening 2.16.2026

by Susan Galbraith

This wintry quiet time, before digging and planting,  
gives us time to pause, imagine our new selves  
and the opportunity to be again  
in the garden  
in the forest.

And what can all this teach us  
about health,  
mental and nutritional,  
and resetting?

This year, let's not be so set on looking for what's wrong with this picture.

(The forest is bound to give us lily weed.)

Instead, let's find time to behold in awe  
the wings of a hawk  
shoots of turnip, spinach, kale and chard,  
and the tenderest of pea tendrils  
and remember  
we, all of us, are climbing skyward.

## Building Community Though Field Trips

Pam Ross has been a wonderful planner of field trips for our gardeners. Past outings have gone as far afield as the Flower Show at Longwood Gardens outside Philadelphia, but most are in our own area.

Pam has suggested an early one this year in April.

Join us on Saturday, April 4th to visit the National Arboretum at the height of spring. You can look forward to seeing cherry blossoms, azaleas and magnolias in bloom. If you'd like to be part of this field trip, please email Pam Ross at [paross@starpower.net](mailto:paross@starpower.net).

## Featured Gardeners - Anita Albertson

By Susan Galbraith

If you are a new gardener in our community, you couldn't make a better friend than Anita Albertson. She's one of our friendliest and most generous gardeners with her time and her knowledge. And what she doesn't know she'll tell you to go do research to try and find answers.

And if you miss spotting that innocuous green shoot only to come back the following week to a full onslaught of Lilly weed, or Bindweed, or carpet of dichondra, well then, call the Weed Warrior Queen. Anita and her team have helped bring neglected and severely weed-infested plots to a clean and healthy patch for gardening.

But take care, I'll add a cautionary warning. Anita may say she likes digging in the dirt, and she does. But she doesn't like digging in your dirt again and again. Learn from her, express a grateful heart, then pull up your socks, get out your trowel or your Ho Mi (See below,) and get to work on your own weeds, reminding yourself that a little weeding done early and steadily every day is the way to go to maintain your plot. Don't let things go for weeks 'til things become a jungle!



Anita started early gardening in Eastern Long Island when her parents gave her and her brother each a 2x3 plot, and they both started experimenting, not always successfully, she admits. She also admits to 'foraging' in her parents' and neighbors' plots for blackberries, raspberries, asparagus, and mint.

Many years later, she and her husband joined a community garden in DC at Turtle Park for about fifteen-twenty years. When they moved out of the District, they got on the RCCG waiting list and "got the phone call" for a plot around 2010.

Anita spoke about her love of gardening: I'm excited this year for my own garden after reading something about medieval gardens. Plants that are not good for commercial farming. I've just ordered seeds for something called Black salsify, or oyster plant, which has a deep tap root and improves the soil and contains more prebiotic inulin than any other plant. It also thrives in any soil and even in drought. Another is Good King Henry. Its leaves are like spinach, shoots are like asparagus, and its flowers are like broccoli. Both are perennials and enrich the soil. A third plant is orach and comes in colors like purple, gold and green. The leaves don't bolt or go bitter and it handles both heat and frost, and you can eat it raw.

I'm also interested in companion planting this year and last year I did find mixing plants in the same bed, everything did better.

As far as our garden as a whole goes, we should all volunteer a little bit. Why wouldn't we all want to give back to this wonderful space that has been "loaned" us? And I understand that, as a community, we need to balance maintaining good garden practices with compassion for longtime gardeners facing health challenges for instance. There is a tug.

I would love to have more opportunities for an exchange of information. Maybe a treasure hunt.

What's your favorite Tool? Mine is the Ho Mi, a Korean hand plough.

See Anita's article in this first edition of our 2026 newsletter.

# Companion Planting: Designing a Healthier, More Productive Garden

By Camilla Gagliolo

Companion planting is the deliberate placement of different crops in proximity to improve plant health, optimize space, deter pests, and increase yields. While often associated with traditional and organic gardening systems, companion planting is grounded in ecological principles: biodiversity, mutualism, and functional plant relationships.

Rather than growing crops in monocultures, companion planting mimics natural plant communities, where diversity strengthens resilience.

## *Why Companion Planting Works*

Companion planting leverages several biological mechanisms:

### 1. Pest Management (Biological Control)

Certain plants repel pests through scent or chemical compounds, while others attract beneficial insects that prey on garden pests.

- Aromatic herbs can mask the scent of host crops.
- Flowering plants attract predatory insects such as lady beetles and parasitic wasps.
- Trap crops lure pests away from main crops.

### 2. Nutrient Enhancement

Some plants improve soil fertility for neighboring crops.

- Legumes fix atmospheric nitrogen through symbiosis with rhizobia bacteria.
- Deep-rooted plants draw up nutrients from lower soil layers, making them available near the surface.

### 3. Physical Support & Microclimate Regulation

Plants can provide structural or environmental benefits.

- Tall crops offer shade to heat-sensitive plants.
- Vining plants use upright crops as natural trellises.
- Dense groundcovers suppress weeds and retain soil moisture.

### 4. Biodiversity & Disease Reduction

Mixed plantings reduce the spread of crop-specific pests and pathogens, compared to single-crop beds.

## *Classic Companion Planting Combinations*

The “Three Sisters” (Indigenous Polyculture System)

- **Corn** – provides vertical support.

- **Beans** – fix nitrogen and climb the corn.
- **Squash** – shades soil, suppresses weeds, deters pests.

This system demonstrates structural layering and nutrient cooperation.

#### Tomatoes and Basil

- Basil may help deter hornworms and whiteflies.
- Both thrive in similar soil and sunlight conditions.
- Many gardeners report improved flavor and vigor when grown together.

#### Carrots and Onions

- Onions repel carrot flies.
- Carrots' low foliage allows efficient space usage between onion rows.

#### Cabbage and Aromatic Herbs (Thyme, Dill, Rosemary)

- Strong scents may confuse cabbage moths.
- Dill attracts beneficial predatory insects.

#### Lettuce and Radishes

- Radishes grow quickly and break up soil.
- Lettuce benefits from slight shade and shared spacing.

#### Plants That Attract Beneficial Insects

Integrating insectary plants enhances natural pest control.

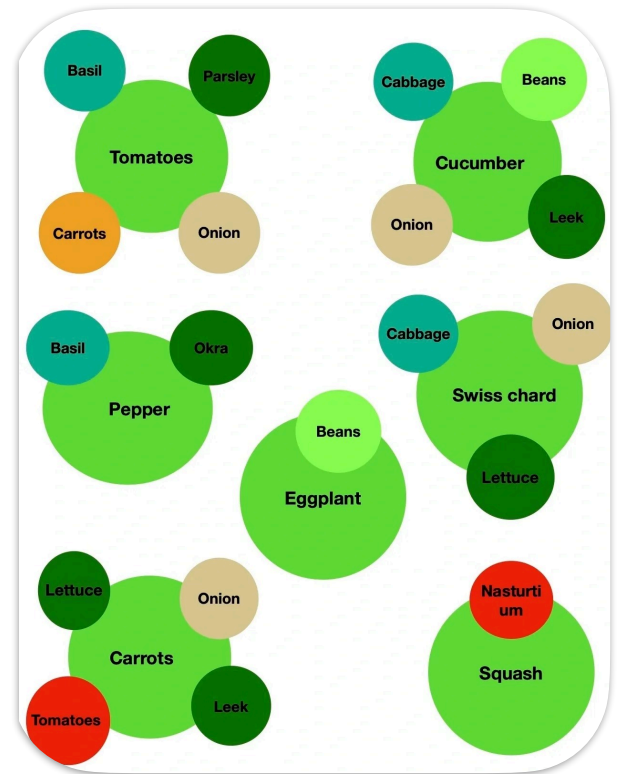
- **Calendula** – attracts pollinators and predatory insects.
- **Nasturtiums** – function as trap crops for aphids.
- **Yarrow** – supports beneficial wasps and ladybugs.
- **Borage** – attracts bees and may improve neighboring plant vigor.

#### *Nitrogen-Fixing Companions*

Legumes form nodules on their roots containing bacteria that convert atmospheric nitrogen into plant-available forms.

- Peas
- Beans

These are particularly beneficial when rotated through beds or interplanted with heavy feeders like brassicas.



## *Companion Planting for Pest Deterrence*

Certain combinations are widely used in integrated pest management:

- **Marigolds** – may suppress nematodes in soil.
- **Garlic** – repels aphids and spider mites.
- **Mint** – deters ants and cabbage moths (best grown in containers due to aggressive spreading).

## *Plants to Avoid Pairing*

Companion planting also involves understanding antagonistic relationships:

- Beans and onions may inhibit each other.
- Fennel tends to suppress many neighboring plants.
- Potatoes and tomatoes share susceptibility to similar diseases, increasing risk when grown together.

## *Designing a Companion Planting Plan*

When planning a bed:

1. Group crops with similar sunlight and water needs.
2. Mix flowering plants among vegetables.
3. Combine root depths (shallow + deep) to maximize soil usage.
4. Integrate fast growers with slow growers for efficient space use.
5. Rotate families annually to prevent disease buildup.

Sketching a layout before planting ensures intentional spacing and functional diversity.

## *Limitations and Realistic Expectations*

While companion planting offers ecological benefits, not all claims are scientifically validated. Effects can vary by region, climate, and pest pressure. Companion planting works best as part of a broader strategy including:

- Crop rotation
- Healthy soil management
- Proper spacing
- Regular monitoring

Companion planting transforms a garden from a collection of isolated crops into a dynamic ecosystem. By thoughtfully pairing plants for mutual benefit—whether for pest deterrence, nutrient enhancement, or spatial efficiency—gardeners can cultivate healthier plants and more resilient growing systems.

At its core, companion planting is ecological design in action: working with natural relationships rather than against them

More information can be found at the Farmers' Almanac with a chart of vegetables and herbs for companion planting at <https://www.almanac.com/content/companion-planting-chart-vegetables>

# Early Spring Garden Preparation and Planting

By Camilla Gagliolo

Spring in a Washington, D.C. community garden marks a season of renewal and growth. With thoughtful soil preparation and smart plant selection, gardeners can take advantage of the cool early season to establish healthy, productive beds. From leafy greens to early root vegetables, cool-season crops form the backbone of spring planting, offering fresh, flavorful harvests that signal the start of a long and abundant growing season ahead. Here are some ideas for planting early spring crops in Washington, D.C., tailored to the local climate (USDA Zone 7 region) and including advice on soil preparation and early-season choices.

## *Spring Awakening: Plant tips*

As winter loosens its grip and early spring light returns to the community garden, gardeners across the DMV area begin preparing soil, laying out beds, and sowing the first seeds of the season. Early spring planting, when executed with good timing and proper soil preparation, sets the foundation for a productive growing year. In the metro area, where spring can still bring cool nights and even late frosts, choosing the right plants and preparing the soil thoroughly are key to a successful garden.

## *Preparing Your Soil for Spring Planting*

### **1. Clean up and clear beds.**

Before planting, remove leftover debris, dead plants, and weeds from garden beds. Clearing old material not only tidies the space but reduces pests and disease pressure for new seedlings.

### **2. Amend soil.**

Cool-season growth depends on fertile, well-drained soil. If soil is heavy or depleted, amend it with well-aged compost or balanced organic fertilizer to improve texture and nutrient content.

### **3. Turn and loosen the ground.**

In early spring, once the soil is dry enough to work (not wet or clumpy), turn the beds with a fork or tiller to break compacted layers and improve root penetration. Add compost or other organic matter as you work the soil. Avoid over-tilling, which can damage beneficial soil structure and spread . (See the article by Anita Albertson about tilling or no tilling in this issue of the RCCG newsletter).

### **4. Warm the soil if possible.**

Before planting cold-tolerant crops, you can speed soil warming by removing insulating mulch or add garden coverings to warm up the soil.

## *What to Plant in Early Spring*

Washington, D.C.'s spring season offers a window for cool-season sowing even before the last frost fully passes. Many vegetables and annuals germinate in cool soils and thrive in moderate spring temperatures. Below are recommended options for early spring planting:

### Cool-Season Vegetables (Direct Seed or Transplant Early)

These crops tolerate cool soils and can be sown or transplanted outdoors **as soon as the ground is workable** (often in *March through early April*).

- **Peas** – plant directly outdoors early; support with trellises for climbing.
- **Spinach** – germinates quickly and tolerates cool weather; succession plant for continuous harvest.
- **Lettuce & Leafy Greens (e.g., Swiss chard)** – fast-growing salad greens enjoy spring temperatures.
- **Kale & Collards** – hardy greens that can handle light frosts.
- **Radishes** – quick to mature (often in ~3–6 weeks) and ideal for early sowing.
- **Beets & Carrots** – sow seeds directly for roots; they perform well in cool soils.
- **Onions (from sets or transplants)** – plant as soon as soil can be worked for best results.
- **Cabbage, Broccoli, Cauliflower** – cool-season brassicas that perform best in early spring.

### Early Herbs & Flowers

While some herbs wait for warmer conditions, a few can be started early or indoors to transplant later:

- **Chives and parsley** – can be started indoors and planted in early spring.

## *Timing and Best Practices*

- **Monitor frost dates.** In D.C., last average frost dates often occur in **mid April**, so plan your planting calendar accordingly and protect tender plants with row covers if an unexpected frost threatens.
- **Succession plant.** Sow cool-season crops in intervals (every 2–3 weeks) for extended harvests rather than planting everything at once.
- **Harden off seedlings.** If starting plants indoors, acclimate them outdoors gradually over several days before transplanting to avoid shock.

## Recipe Corner

### *Cabbage is having a moment*

“2026 Is the Year of the Cabbage: Meet the Most Underrated Leafy Green,” crows Vogue magazine.

“London’s Sexiest Produce Star Is a Cabbage,” the New York Times informs in an article about the Hispi cabbage. “It’s glamorous,” said Margot Henderson, the chef of Rochelle Canteen and a leader of modern British cooking. “It’s a bit of a supermodel, isn’t it?”

Such fame was inevitable, I suppose, after Brussel sprouts – miniature cabbages, after all – had their decade in the limelight and now frequent every trendy brunch menu this side of the Atlantic.

Fashionistas aside, we gardeners have long known the delights and versatilities of cabbage -- even if they can be difficult to grow through our hot summers filled with harlequin beetles, cabbage worms and other vermin. But if you can get them through September, with a frost or two in October/November, yummy. They sweeten up and are even more delicious. Also good: plant in the fall for an early spring harvest. Cabbages, at least the traditional green, savoy and red varieties, are generally hardy and can survive even the coldest winters. And they usually keep well in the fridge for a couple of weeks. (Napas and other Asian cabbages are more tender and usually don’t make it through a winter or a long stay in the fridge.)

But once harvested, cabbages can be prepared in an array of methods: from slaws to salads, roasts, braises, soups, pickles or ferments, the lowly cabbage holds up to almost anything; the stronger the flavor, the better! Rather than the long boiling our grandparents may have known and loved, I’ve been really enjoying high-heat methods to blacken and caramelize. Really brings out the sweetness and deep flavor. Take the two recipes below: the first, from Smitten Kitchen author Deb Perelman, calls for high-heat roasting before dressing with vinegar and salt (like potato chips). The other, from Andy Baraghani, calls for searing and charring and then braising till it falls apart. Bon app.

Here are two recipes:

#### *Charred salt & vinegar cabbage (by Deb Perelman).*

1 medium green cabbage, halved, cored, then cut into 1-2” cubes  
 2 Tbs olive oil  
 1 teaspoon kosher salt (or to taste)  
 ½ teaspoon black pepper  
 2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
 4 garlic cloves, lightly smashed  
 ½ cup broth (chicken, beef or veg)  
 1/3 cup white vinegar

Heat oven to 475F.

On a rimmed 9”x13” baking sheet, toss the cabbage with the olive oil, salt and pepper to coat evenly (but leaving chunks intact). Dot the butter over the top. Roast for 15 minutes until the cabbage is black in spots. Use a spatula to turn the cabbage over. Scatter the garlic cloves in the pan.

Return to the oven and roast for another 15 minutes until the cabbage is charred. Pour the broth and the vinegar carefully into the baking sheet. Return to the oven for the final 15 minutes or until the garlic cloves are tender and the liquids have been reduced to a thin puddle. Finish with a sprinkle of salt.

*Fall-apart caramelized cabbage smothered in anchovies and dill (by Andy Baraghani)*

1 head cabbage (green, red or savoy)  
 ¾ cup olive oil  
 Kosher salt  
 4 oil-packed anchovies, drained and finely chopped  
 1 cup coarsely chopped dill  
 ½ cup toasted walnuts, finely chopped  
 2 tablespoons lemon zest  
 1 tablespoon lemon juice  
 Black pepper

Preheat oven to 350F

Half the cabbage through the core. Cut each half into three wedges, keeping the core intact.

Heat ¼ cup olive oil in a cast-iron or stainless-steel skillet over medium-high heat until the oil is hot and shimmering. Season the cabbage with salt, then place in the skillet flat side down. Using tongs or other implement, press down on the cabbage so it becomes deeply charred and starts to get tender (it will get softer in the oven), 3-5 minutes per side. Cook in batches if your skillet is not large enough to accommodate them all.

Remove the skillet from the heat, carefully cover with aluminum foil. Transfer to the oven and roast until the cabbage is very tender, 3-40 minutes. When it's ready, a paring knife should slide in and out. Like buttah!

While the cabbage is in the oven, in a medium bowl, stir together anchovies, garlic, dill, walnuts, lemon zest, lemon juice and remaining ½ cup olive oil. Season with salt and lots of pepper. Let sit for 10 minutes.

Once the cabbage is soft, arrange on a platter, spoon the sauce around and between the layers. Sprinkle with more pepper. Serve.

Step 2: Pit and cut each peach into 1" thick wedges, then core and cut each tomato into 1" thick wedges. Place tomatoes & peaches on a serving platter, pouring any juices from the cutting board over the dish. Season generously with flaky sea salt to draw out juices.

