

Summer Gardening

Summer is when we begin to harvest some of the vegetables and fruits that were either planted earlier this spring or are perennial crops. My favorite perennial crop is asparagus but by now I am actually tired of eating it. This is much to the delight of my friend Kathy and my neighbors who I have been supplying with the surplus! Of course some people will freeze or can asparagus but for my taste, it is only good to eat fresh. I have a dedicated raised bed for asparagus that is about eight foot long and four foot wide and about eight inches deep. This bed has produced well over 30 pounds of asparagus each season for the past three years. It took two seasons of scant picking to establish the bed but now I pick from mid May until the 4th of July. With good care, this bed of asparagus should be productive for the next 20 years at least.

Another semi-perennial fruit crop that is now being harvested is strawberries. I say "semi-perennial" because strawberries really only yield well for two or three seasons unless they are impeccably maintained. Like asparagus they perform very well in a dedicated raised bed that is kept completely weed free and pest free. Common strawberry pests include slugs which are nocturnal (look for them at night with a flashlight), the tarnished plant bug which causes tiny, malformed berries and the blossom clipper which cuts off strawberry flowers before they form fruit. It also helps to design the bed so that plastic netting or chicken wire can be stretched over the top to keep out birds. Strawberry plantings require annual thinning of most of the plants and mowing off the foliage after harvest. They also need fertilizer after harvest applied at the rate of four pounds of 5-10-10 per 100 square feet of bed.

Spinach and lettuce have been harvested for several weeks now and most early plantings are starting to bolt (sending up flowering stalks). Both vegetables become bitter tasting when they flower as well as in very hot, sunny weather. You can allow one or two plants to go to seed and scatter the seed beneath them for a late summer-early fall crop or just replant fresh seeds in late July to mid August. "Volunteer" lettuce and spinach plants from bolted plants will not be exactly the same as the ones you planted from seed earlier this year, since they were likely hybrid plants, but they will still taste great!

Some folks are harvesting zucchini and yellow summer squash right now. These taste best when picked at six inches in length or even less. Over grown (12 inches and longer) zucchini are still good if cut lengthwise, scooped out and stuffed with chopped meat, cheese and covered with tomato sauce. They may also be sliced, breaded, fried and prepared like eggplant or made into zucchini bread or cake.

Freshly picked peas are so tasty that few even make it into the kitchen for cooking. Radishes get hotter as the outside temperatures rise and beets also get woody in hot summer weather. Broccoli is best picked before the flower buds separate. By the time a few yellow flowers appear the broccoli is past prime. Most varieties of broccoli will continue to produce side shoots after the main head is picked so do not remove them from the garden. Cauliflower is picked as soon as the heads are large enough to harvest. Allow cilantro and dill to go to seed and watch for new "volunteer" seedlings to appear in a few weeks. Both these crops attract beneficial insects to your garden and should be allowed to go to seed. Hill the soil up around the base of potato plants to protect the developing tubers from sunlight. Hand pick and destroy yellow and black striped Colorado potato beetles as you see them and watch for their yellow to orange colored eggs on the undersides of leaves as well as their pink colored larvae. Harvest green beans as soon as they are big enough to eat!

Finally, ignore your lawn except for mowing it only when it is three inches long or longer.

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