

The Garden Plot, June 2009

By Robin Mittenthal, University Apartments Community Gardens Committee

Possible garden tasks for June: Stop planting cool-weather crops like peas, broccoli, and radishes. Start planting warm-weather crops like tomatoes, cucumbers, and basil. Work some fertilizer into the soil where you will plant these crops or (if you've already planted them) scratch the fertilizer into the soil around the base of the plants. Cage your tomatoes or (a better idea) stake them with a strong metal or wooden stake, then tie them to the stake every time they grow about 10 cm (4 in) taller. Cucumbers can be protected from flea beetles and cucumber beetles with a piece of floating row cover. Apply the row cover (tightly sealed with soil around the edges) when you plant the seeds and leave it on until the plants are about 15 cm (6 in) tall. Eggplant *must* be protected from flea beetles with row cover or it will not grow. Weeding your garden and water thoroughly (that is, until the soil is wet to a depth of about 10 cm or 4 in) once a week if it does not rain (small-seeded crops like lettuce may need lighter watering every three days or so if it is hot and dry).

News from the Eagle Heights Garden Committee April meeting: Because demand for garden plots is now very high, two meetings were held in April and early May to decide on a detailed, formal policy for assignment of garden plots. The policy was not finalized as of the writing of this column, but it will be posted on the garden web site and included in the garden plot application in future years.

Members of the Garden Oversight Committee (administrators from various departments and units within the university) made their annual visit to the Garden Committee to introduce themselves and explain what they do. Basically, they make sure the gardens are being run well and in agreement with university policies. They also provide expertise and support for garden projects.

The three garden workers reported on their work around the gardens, including a small pilot program to collect compostable materials from Eagle Heights apartments and ongoing efforts to clean out the two tree islands near Eagle Heights gardens. Two committee members reported on the results of their ongoing research into alternatives to portapotties for the gardens.

Gardeners are encouraged to attend the next meeting (7 pm, June 23rd, in the Community Center) and help run the gardens. You can also get involved by posting and responding to posts at the garden forum, <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/forum/>.

This month's column: Cucumbers! Along with pumpkins, gourds, squash, melons, and watermelons, cucumbers are members of the plant family Cucurbitaceae, which takes its name from the Latin word for gourd, *cucurbita*.

Different types of cucurbits are from different parts of the world. While watermelons and melons are probably originally from sub-Saharan Africa, where they still grow wild, and winter squash are from the Americas, cucumbers are probably from India, where they've been grown for at least 3,000 years. Wild cucumbers are both bitter and covered with sharp spines, so it's assumed that the process of altering the crop for human consumption ("domesticating" it) involved repeatedly selecting and planting seeds from fruits that were naturally a little less bitter spiny than others.

Written records show that cucumbers were eaten regularly by the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Chinese. The plants had reached North America by the sixteenth century and have been popular here ever since. Cucumbers come in many shapes and sizes (including "slicing" cucumbers, which are large and soft, and "pickling" varieties, which are small and dense) and are eaten fresh (sliced, or ground up for cold soups), pickled (either on their own or with other vegetables, as in chutney and curry), and cooked (for soup). Some cultures also eat the seeds, young leaves, and stems of the plant either fresh or cooked. Cucumbers are mostly water and so are not particularly nutritious, but there are orange varieties that contain useful amounts of vitamin A.

A detailed guide to growing cucumbers would take more space than I have left, but here are a few important things to know and do:

-Cucumbers are vulnerable to many diseases and insect pests. Grow cucumbers in a different part of your garden each year to prevent the buildup of diseases in the soil. If your plants wilt and look sick, pull them out! Protect young cucumber plants with row covers as discussed above. Remove the row covers when the plants start to flower, since other insects must visit the flowers to pollinate them.

-You can buy small cucumber plants in plastic pots, but they don't really like to be transplanted (they have a single deep root called a "taproot" that is easily damaged). You're generally better off planting 5-6 seeds in a

small mound of soil with some organic fertilizer, covering them with row cover, and removing all but two of the plants once they seem well established as seedlings. The fertilizer is important!

-Give cucumbers enough space. They can grow *at least* 1 m (3 feet) in every direction from where they start out. If you help the vines onto a piece of fencing, you can get them to grow upward and use less flat space.

-It is normal for cucumber plants to produce nice-looking fruits for a while, then produce ugly fruits (which are still fine to eat!), then die. If you want to have cucumbers for a long time, plant some in late May or early June, then again at two week intervals into late July.

For more details on growing cucumbers, see the manual at <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/index.shtml> or a very nice guide from the University of Illinois at <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/cucumber1.html>.

Next month: what is soil and how does it work?