

News from the March Garden Meeting: We thanked our registrar, Gretel Dentine, and many volunteers for their energetic efforts in making the March 20 seed fair a huge success. More than 300 gardeners and their families attended the fair, and we gave out almost all of the large number of seed packets generously donated to us by seed companies. We made plans for upcoming workdays in the gardens, discussed ways to try to cut our plumbing expenses this coming year (and talked more about the need for and cost of a complete replacement of our water system), and evaluated our progress (small, but solid) toward replacing the splintery and hard-to-read corner marking stakes at Eagle Heights.

Our next meeting and potluck dinner will be at 6:30 pm on Wednesday, Apr. 28 in the Eagle Heights Community Center. We really, really need new student members (hey, students!), but all gardeners are welcome -- please come and help run the gardens!

Toward the end of the month (May 20), the danger of frost should be gone and growing conditions are suitable for growing a wide variety of crops. How do you begin to fill the remaining space in your garden? Putting in a small salsa garden can be a satisfying way to start.

A basic salsa garden contains tomatoes, peppers, cilantro, and onions. Seedlings and sets for the main ingredients needed for the salsa recipe at the end of this column are currently available at the Hilldale and Dane County farmers' markets and local garden stores.

For tomatoes, choose seedlings that appear to have a strong root structure. Consider purchasing a yellow variety for a sweeter flavor that is lower in acidity. "Mr. Stripey" is a good one to try. Some sources say that yellow tomatoes may also be more resistant to potato blight. Prepare your tomato site by choosing an area that gets full sun and applying a generous amount of compost or organic fertilizer to the topsoil. Space plants about 2' apart, and bury the seedlings so that only the top 1/3 of the plant is sticking out of the ground. This will build a stronger root system and a more productive plant. As the plant gets larger, you will need to support it with a sturdy structure. Tomato cages are inadequate and thin sticks set shallowly into the ground will fall over in a heavy rain. Planting marigolds near your tomatoes is also recommended to deter some pests. Harvest tomatoes when just beginning to turn red. This will keep them from bruising during transport and prevent pests and animals from enjoying your ripe tomatoes. Picked tomatoes can fully ripen on a sunny windowsill or counter at home.

When choosing peppers, both sweet and spicy peppers can be used for salsas. Smaller hot peppers do well in the Wisconsin climate. Bell peppers do well also, but they usually need a little bit of extra space and attention. If you choose a variety of bell pepper other than green, be prepared to allow extra time for it to mature from green to its chosen color. Again, choose seedlings with strong roots and prepare your site the same as you would for tomatoes. Tossing a book of matches into each hole where you will place a pepper plant is recommended to provide a bit of sulfur. Space about 2' apart and bury the base of each plant. Also, separate mild peppers from spicier ones to keep them from cross-pollinating, which could alter their flavors.

Cilantro and onions are relatively easy to care for. Consider purchasing or growing a second cilantro plant one month after the first in case one plant dies or goes to seed early. As for onions, purchase them as sets at this point in the season and bury them so that the bottom of the set is 1" underground. Space onion plants about 6" apart.

Recipe for Easy Tomato-Serrano Salsa (makes 2-4 cups)

3-5 ripe tomatoes

2-5 serrano chiles (more if you like really spicy food), stemmed

½ cup of fresh cilantro
1 large garlic clove, peeled and minced (optional)
1 small onion
2 Tablespoons fresh lime or lemon juice
¾ teaspoon salt
dash of white vinegar

Core and seed the tomatoes, if desired, and dice into ¼” chunks. Place in a large glass or ceramic bowl. Cut the chiles in half lengthwise (protect hands with gloves or plastic bags if needed). Scrape out most or all of the seeds to control spiciness. Finely chop the chiles and place them in the bowl with the tomatoes. Chop the cilantro and add it to the tomato mixture along with the minced garlic. Finely dice the onion and add it to the tomato mixture. Add the lime juice, salt, and vinegar, and adjust seasonings to suit your tastes. For best results, let the mixture sit for 1 or more hours before serving to allow flavors to mix.

For more information about growing salsa crops, refer to previous garden columns available here: <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/tips/monthlyadvice.shtml>.