

The Garden Plot, September 2007

By Robin Mittenthal, University Apartments Community Gardens Committee

As we move into September, days get shorter, nights get cooler, and late in the month there's a small possibility that it might freeze (reach temperatures of 0 C/32 F). Your heat-loving summer crops (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, pumpkins, squash, etc.) will start to die even without frost, but crops like cabbage, broccoli, spinach, and other greens that do not do well in hot weather will start to grow more quickly and taste better. Crops like peas that you can't grow at all in the heat of the summer can be grown again.

Let's start with some tips for finishing up the summer crops. If your tomatoes are dying, this is normal. Some may live up to the first frost, but tomatoes cannot live through frost at all, so make sure to harvest all of their fruit before frost – even the very green ones. Some of it may ripen inside your home. Peppers and eggplants can be harvested and eaten at any size – if the plants seem to be dying, grab the fruits and eat them!

Squash and pumpkins are very different from tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants. The plants need heat to grow, but the fruits are very tolerant of cold and actually taste better if you leave them out in the field until after the first frost.

If you haven't already harvested your potatoes, wait until the plants are completely dead and dried up. Then, dig them only as you need them, digging the last ones before the ground freezes solid. Store potatoes in a cool, dark place, but do not refrigerate them.

Harvest summer cabbages when they form dense heads that do not yield when you squeeze them. Harvest broccoli and cauliflower when the flowering heads are still densely packed like the ones you buy in stores.

Now, some planting. In early September, you can still plant cabbages, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, beets, turnips, and peas, and they might -- or might not -- mature before winter comes. Even in late September, you can plant radishes and greens (spinach, lettuce, Napa cabbage/bok choy/Chinese cabbage, mizuna, tat soi, chard, kale, etc.). These plants grow quickly and will mature before frost. Chard and spinach can survive freezing at least a few times, and spinach is wonderful to eat if it has been frozen. Kale will survive until late November or even December.

In late September, if you have the time and can find or buy the materials, it's worth building what gardeners call a "cold frame." This will act as a miniature greenhouse and can give you salad greens for much of the late fall and early spring. Google the words "cold frame" to learn more, but many designs online are too complicated -- all you really need is four straw bales or a wooden frame topped with a sheet of transparent plastic or an old plastic window. Plant crops like spinach, kale, and tat soi, keep them watered, and harvest by removing individual leaves without pulling out the main plants. The plants may seem to shrivel up and die when it gets very cold, but many will survive and start to grow whenever the weather warms up at all.

Next month's column will discuss the planting of garlic, which should happen in late October, as well as general preparations for the winter.

If you need more information about gardening, e-mail me at mittenth@gmail.com or visit the Eagle Heights Gardens web site at <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/>. Previous "Garden Plot" columns are available there, together with much more helpful information.

Happy gardening!