

Digging into Summer

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At last, we've said *adieu* to the last of the spring frosts and are now looking ahead to summer, and it couldn't have come too soon for us. As much as we love spring and nature's slow re-awakening after a long winter, it's so good to feel the heat of the sun on our faces again.

Spring has indeed been bursting out all over; Peonies putting on their dazzling show of color, sweet juicy Strawberries tempting us with their plump fruits, luscious Lettuce and other vitamin rich greens all have been growing in the cool of the spring thrilling us with lots of color, sending another grey winter into our memories. It's time now to prepare for yet another change that will reward us with more of nature's many miracles.

By now the Lettuces, Spinach, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Peas and other cool weather crops we planted in the spring are growing strong, and you've probably even had a salad or two already. Now it's time to get back to work and get the heat lovers in the ground. Late May to early or sometimes even mid June--if we've had a cold, late spring--is time to set out your seedlings for Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant, and heat loving herbs like Basil, Dill and Cilantro. Try planting some Basil with your Tomatoes for better flavor. It's best to wait for the soil and air temperature to warm up before planting these crops because if it's too cool they just won't grow.

To make the transplanting as stress free for your seedlings as possible, wait for either an overcast day or do your planting in the late afternoon and be sure to give them a good watering when you've finished. And while on the subject of watering, it's better to water deeply and less frequently and when possible water in the morning to give the sun a chance to dry the foliage which will help minimize diseases. *Don't forget to "harden off" these seedlings before planting to acclimate them to their new environment

After the soil has warmed to 70 degrees or so you can sow your Beans, Summer Squash, Cucumbers, Pumpkins and Melons directly into the garden. To insure a good supply of radishes and carrots to add to those delicious salads you'll be making all summer you can sow small amounts every few weeks.

After getting everything planted, take a break--go to the beach or for a walk in the woods and drink in the glorious gifts that nature brings us every year and in every season. You know the old saying...wake up and smell the Roses...or the Peonies...or whatever you'd like.

But wait a minute, while you've been out smelling the whatever, you may have missed the fact that there are a few weeds popping up in your freshly disturbed garden soil and the time to deal with them is now while they're still small and easy to remove. This can be done in a variety of ways; either by hand, with a 3 pronged cultivator or with a hoe, but whatever your tool of choice, just make sure the job gets done. These young weeds make a good addition to the compost pile along with other yard waste and kitchen scraps (no meat, fish or cheese please), and when finished can be used in the garden as a source of nutrients.

Once you've got all your garden beds weeded and looking good, it's time to apply some mulch to help keep the weeds at bay and to hold moisture in the soil. Some good mulch choices are straw (not hay!), leaf mold (composted leaves) or dried grass clippings.

We've got one more job to nag you about and then we'll talk about some other ways to make your garden more enjoyable. As the season progresses and you start seeing flowers on your Pepper, Eggplant and Tomato plants it's time to apply a side dressing of compost or fertilizer to give them a nutrient boost as they set and ripen their fruits. Just pull back the mulch, spread the compost or scratch in some fertilizer and then replace the mulch.

If we think of the garden as a kitchen garden, you know we've got to have a good assortment of herbs. Herbs are critical to the success of any recipe and deserve a place of honor in your garden as well. In addition to the quartet of herbs immortalized in song; Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme, try some Sweet Marjoram, a relative of Oregano with a sweet flowery fragrance. It's worth growing for its scent alone, and try adding a few fresh leaves to pasta or vegetable dishes. French Tarragon, which often is a perennial herb in our zone adds its subtle licorice like flavor to chicken, potato and seafood dishes as well as being an important ingredient in *Béarnaise* sauce and *Fines Herbs* blend. Summer Savory--one of our favorites--is an easy to grow and under-utilized herb which complements beans, and tomatoes and will also bring your grilled summer pizzas to a new level.

Edible flowers are another wonderful addition to the kitchen garden. Pansies and their perennial cousin Violas add interest, color and a slight minty flavor to salads. Nasturtium petals or whole flowers add a peppery zing and Calendula petals sprinkled on top of salad greens invite closer scrutiny of the mix of flavors. While you're at it, plant other flowers in your veggie garden to attract beneficial insects and birds which will help control the pesky insects that are an inevitable part of the natural web of life. Flowers will also be very inviting to bees whose pollinating is critical to a successful garden. These and other showy flowers will bring a rainbow of colors to the garden and when cut have the added benefit of rounding out your herbal bouquets for the kitchen table.

Until next time, we hope that this year will be the best yet for your kitchen garden.

Some Helpful Hints and ideas:

1. Tomatoes will develop roots along their stems so if you've got some transplants that are a bit leggy bury them deep in the soil and those extra roots will help the plants to take up more water and nutrients.
2. Because Lettuce doesn't do very well in the summer heat do successive sowings every 3-4 weeks and plant in a part of the garden with sun in the morning and shade in the afternoon to prevent it from "bolting" and you'll have a constant supply throughout the summer
3. Check out *Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening* by Louise Riotte for some ideas about companion planting, and learn how certain plant combinations enhance the growth and flavor of their neighbors.
4. Want to do some composting? Browse through Stu Campbell's *Let it Rot!: The Gardener's Guide to Composting*, or visit The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) composting website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/FEATURE/backyard/compost.html>.
5. Sunflowers, Zinnias, Marigolds and Cosmos are some other flowers to consider planting in the garden along with your vegetables and herbs.
6. Use the first few tomatoes and basil of the season to make up a *salsa cruda*; just chop up the tomatoes, basil, garlic and some baby veggies, add some olive oil and salt and let this mixture sit for an hour or so for the flavors to develop, then toss over cooked pasta for an easy satisfying supper from the garden.