

## HOME & GARDEN

# Making notes of summer's garden lesson

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A dreary afternoon is excuse enough to brew a second cup of tea and toast my toes by the fire while I make some notes of the season past. It's a good time for recording some of the lessons learned — or relearned — during the summer.

I learned a lot about brussel sprouts this year. I had never grown them before and without any checking\* at all I merrily planted the young plants 12 or 14 inches apart, much as I would cabbage plants. It took a while for the plants to spread their wide lateral arms and I was just beginning to get the idea that they might be overcrowded when I visited my aunt and saw her stand of brussel sprouts. And a stand it was. I felt I had entered a redwood forest. Her plants easily reached to my waist and took up the space of a hoop skirt.

Next year I will pay attention to the planting directions. I checked and the catalog clearly states that brussel sprouts should be set out 18 to

24 inches apart. It is also important to break off the lateral branches as the buds begin to develop. They will grow much larger faster. Leave just a curly tuft of leaves at the top of the plant.

I like having brussel sprouts in the garden because they are hardy and will withstand several frosts. If there are any sprouts left to harvest when the ground is about to freeze, the whole plant can be pulled and hung in the cellar where they will keep without further attention just like the cabbages hanging by their side.

Also remember that brussel sprouts, like cabbage, are heavy feeders. Plant them in a well fertilized spot and they will grow vigorously.

A quiet Sunday afternoon is also the perfect time to make sure the successes of any new varieties have been noted. Otherwise there may be some frustrating hours spent over seed catalogs in the spring trying to remember which of the half dozen varieties of cucumber was the one that did so well. I tried Burpee's Streamliner

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cuke this year and was very happy with the production and the quality. Its fruits were long and dense and had a relatively small seed cavity.

And speaking of cucumbers, I absolutely promise that next spring I really will take last year's advice and grow cucumbers on a support. They grow better because they are easier to weed and care for and they are certainly easier to find and harvest.

Another piece of my own advice that I plan to take regards the use of black plastic mulch. Last year I used it on half my tomatoes and they ripened much earlier than those mulched with hay. This year I did start out mulching with black plastic, but a storm picked it up and left it sitting on the bean poles. I never got around to replacing it properly. Note for next June —

when setting out the black plastic, make sure it is firmly anchored with rocks or sufficient earth to hold it in place, even through our notoriously brisk breezes.

Additionally I promise to tie up my tomatoes and to keep tying them to supports as they grow. This will make pruning suckers much easier and it will mean fewer tomatoes lost to rot from resting on the ground unseen under thick foliage.

Remember to resist planting crops like kale and rutabagas until mid-July at least.

Rutabagas must mature during cool weather to turn out tender and sweet. If planted too early in the year, they may grow wonderfully lush foliage but the roots will be bitter and pulpy. They may also be marked with tunnels caused by the cabbage maggot.

Next year I am also going to shrink my garden. For two years my husband has been saying the garden is too large and now I am ready to agree. The family is smaller now and

after two seasons I have a better idea of how much food I can actually handle and store properly. Besides, as times goes by I am improving my soil, making the same space more productive.

These are some of my thoughts looking back over the gardening season. A good garden is not built in a day. It takes time to improve soil fertility and structure.

Neither does a gardener become an expert in one year. It often takes more than one season to learn a lesson. It takes time to learn to work with tools effectively. And it takes even more time to learn what each plant needs, what weaknesses and virtues it has.

But time is always well spent in the garden; it nourishes the body and the spirit.

#### Reminder

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