

HOME & GARDEN

A time to reap and review

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

This has been an extraordinary fall. A startling frost on the 21st of August damaged the edges of my squash plants, but since then the weather has been mild. I am still picking tomatoes from the garden, which is absolutely unheard of this late in the year. And the cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower are still flourishing. Usually I have finished all the freezing I am going to do by now, but this year I am still coming home from work to face mounds of cauliflower and broccoli.

I can't complain though. All this harvest is going to be very welcome when the snows fall. And they will. Already it seems the latest topics of conversation are, "Will this be the coldest winter of the decade?" and "Do you think we'll get as much snow as last year?"

With all this looking forward and looking back, it's good to remember that this is also a good time to review the season and make some notes in the garden notebook that will be useful in the early spring when catalog fever is running high.

It's always nice to look at the successes first. What went well? Which variety produced a bumper crop? Which plants were the healthiest? Then try to analyze the success.

Was the bumper crop produced by an old favorite or by a new variety you had not tried before? I am always encouraging people to try new plants and varieties, and it's not difficult to do because there are always new and improved varieties listed in the spring seed catalogs. But there is no reason to abandon a successful favorite just for the sake of novelty. Maybe you can grow your favorites and split a packet of seeds with a friend or two so that you can still keep trying those exciting sounding varieties without giving up too much space. It's also interesting and instructive to see how the same seeds flourish in different gardens under different conditions.

Were the plants healthy because you used disease and fungus-resistant seed? Don't forget to keep track of the varieties you plant. I now photocopy my seed orders and file the copies in my garden notebook.

Were crops successful because they happened to be planted in a particularly fertile bit of soil? When the soil is rich and healthy, there is much more likelihood of a healthy plant. This is a good time to update your garden map because crop rotation is very important in controlling disease and managing the fertility of the soil. You don't want to plant the same types of crops in the same place two years running because pests and disease can build up in the soil. Neither do you want to plant heavy feeders in the same spot year after year. The soil will become depleted rapidly if you do.

I'm happy to note that my tomatoes did better this year, thanks to a mild September and the use of black plastic mulch, but I am resolving to improve still more. Next year I will use a really heavy black plastic that will be

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more durable and easier to handle. I also promised to tie up my tomato plants more faithfully.

You may be reluctant, but look over the disappointments, too. Should you be using disease and fungus-resistant seed varieties? Has the lack of a fertilization program caused low productivity? Did seeds get planted at the right time? Was transplanting done properly?

My failures were only too obvious this year. I bit off a little more than I could chew this spring. Even though I decreased the size of the vegetable garden, I was busy putting in 100 feet of an "herbwalk" (unfinished), a grass walk, a new perennial border (unfinished, but I rationalize by saying flower gardens are never finished), fruit trees, berry bushes, rose bushes and another hundred trees for to our proposed windbreak. This meant I did not finish transplanting my nursery beds of cabbage and brussel sprouts, and they will be in very short supply this season.

Neither did I hill up my potato plants properly, so my potato crop is almost nonexistent. Also, the potatoes are slightly green, which indicates they were not planted deeply enough and that solanine, a poisonous substance, is present.

Next year I will have to make more realistic estimates about the amount of time any project will take, and that includes routine cultivating and maintenance.

After looking at the successes and disappointments and analyzing the causes, think of any other changes that should be made in the garden. Gardens evolve. Children come and go. Food preferences come and go. Schedules change and there is more or less time to spend in the garden. All these things call for adjustments.

I find this easier to say than to do. Now that the children are only home for short visits I have made the garden somewhat smaller, but more changes are probably called for.

The other evening I was giving some friends a tour of the garden, and they stopped to admire a little patch of lush mustard greens. "Oh, what is this?"

"Mustard greens," I said. "Try some. They're hot."

Testing, tasting, comments and then the question, "What do you do with it?"

"Not much."

I grow it because my husband likes it, but then I have to confess that I almost never serve it to him. It's like the Chinese cabbage I grow because I've resolved to do some serious Chinese cooking. I don't always hold to my resolutions, but someday ...

Autumn is harvest time, and along with the beets, carrots and squash we should be able to harvest a little knowledge and wisdom. Then just wait until next year.