

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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Focus on the vegetable patch

By now, most gardeners ought to have selected their flowering plants and gotten them in place. It's almost too late to plant perennials or annuals to have a real show during this summer. Of course, last minute replacements are necessary as the vagaries of weather and pests take their toll. Perhaps I should add that one's own neglect can also aid in the early demise of a plant, but let's not go there. Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone.

This week, the focus is really the vegetable patch. All the plants except the ones to be planted for cool-weather picking should be in the ground or pots, and well on their way to settling in and growing. Now is the time to begin extra vigilance to watch out for pests. Some preventative measures must be taken. I'm not going to mention fences or netting against deer or rabbits because if you have a vegetable patch, then you must already be armed against those.

Protection against the pests

In the case of potatoes, hilling the plants with salt-marsh hay protects them

from the Colorado potato beetle. The hay acts as a disguise to fool the bugs. Growing vegetables under fleece is often recommended. This method is highly effective as it prevents the bugs from getting to their desired hosts in the first place. Rain and sun can get through. But if you have vegetables in pots or intermingled with flowering plants, fleece is not going to work. You have to check daily and take action right away at the very first sign of an infestation.

Organic pesticidal soaps sprays, physically picking off bugs and caterpillars and dunking them in soap solution or crushing them are the easiest, but most time-consuming, methods of pest control. Sticky traps are quite efficient in signaling the beginning of an attack of whitefly or aphids. In other words, pay attention. For the time you take to attend to the plants, you will be rewarded not only with healthy, delicious vegetables but also, that time will have taken your mind off other worries or conundrums so you can return to them with a fresh outlook. It really does work. Give it a try.

Special help for climbers and tomatoes

A natural and very good way to encourage climbers like peas and beans is what the English refer to as "pea stakes." These are simply slender, multiple-branched twigs placed between the plants to be available for the tendrils to twine around so the whole plant can grow vertically. The pea pods hang for easy picking. The whole effect is rather attractive. This year, I have them growing on a frame of chicken wire and so far it is working well.

For tomatoes, pick off some of the lower leaves as the pests usually begin there. Copper collars are often used wherever slugs threaten. For tall tomato varieties, tripods are better than cages because you can adjust the heights as needed. I recommend using bamboo for aesthetic purposes. From the apex of the tripod, attach a twine and then secure the other end of it to the ground close to the base of the plant. To this twine, using plant clips, attach the plant at intervals. Instead of clips, raffia will work just as well. The plant will grow straight with no chance of flopping over. Pinch off non-fruiting side shoots to promote productivity. I have seen trailing tomatoes used to stunning effect in hanging baskets and window boxes. Perhaps next year I'll try that.

If you provide brassicas with some shade it will greatly reduce the chances for flea beetle attack.

Crop rotation, home produced compost and potting mixtures are all factors in creating a healthy environment for the garden. Natural predators such as birds, insects and other wildlife are so important. Do not add diseased matter to compost bins. Dispose of that with the regular garbage.

The makings of a delicious, healthy and attractive salad from your

garden

Pick your salad greens frequently. If the plant is done, replace with seedlings of varieties that are warm-weather tolerant. Don't allow lettuces to bolt (to produce seeds prematurely). That would be such a waste. A mix of the greens, fresh herbs, and petals of edible flowers, such as marigolds and nasturtiums, is the makings for a delicious, healthy and attractive salad. Add some toasted nuts and seasonal fruits like mangoes or berries, top with warm goat cheese and you have the perfect summer lunch. Couldn't be easier.

Often, our current preferences in vegetables are the results of trends. And so, we forget older, tastier varieties. Many are more disease resistant. It behooves us to obtain those seeds and grow them in our gardens. The orange carrot was at one time a novelty. Hundreds of years ago, people ate purple and white carrots! Diversity for the good of the earth as well as our palettes is crucial. Hence, we must do what is required to maintain an organic, healthy garden. In organic gardening, the intent is not to eliminate problems but to create a balance that keeps the pests under control and yet maintains a garden's beauty and productivity.

Just as I sat down to write this article, I received an email from my local co-op where I share with two other friends a weekly delivery of fruits and vegetables. These are organically grown produce from local farms, always fresh and seasonal. The email said that this past Monday's storm has wiped out the crops of many farms in the area. In a matter of hours, all that hard labor was reduced to nothing!

This news, along with the effect wrought by the floods in the Midwest, is certain to raise further the already soaring food prices. Do we need any more reason for growing some of our own produce?



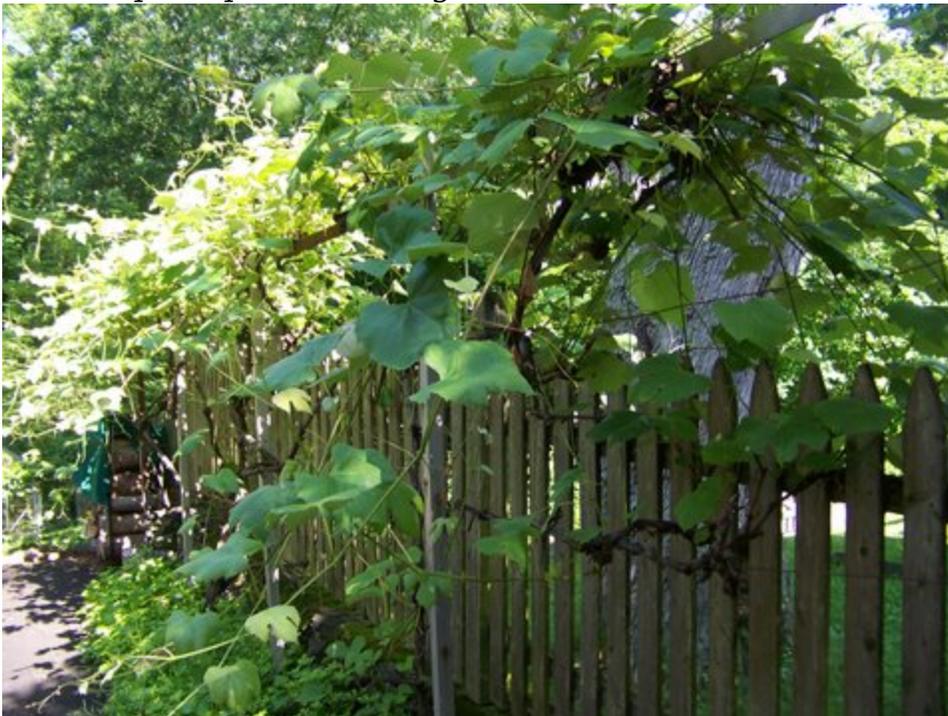
Lettuce and marigolds



More lettuce



Basil in pots; peas climbing



Grape vine



Swiss chard on checkerboard of phlox and slate



Climbing rose losing petals



Tomatoes