

## **Garden Musings: Do This, Not That!**

By: Sally Pitts, Master Gardener

I've got lots of space to fill with plants, which has equated to lots of room for error in my home's landscaping, raised flower beds, raised vegetable beds, and vegetables in rows.

I've planted vegetables at the wrong time in the wrong light in the wrong soil in the wrong space with the wrong trellis. I've generously watered plants and wondered why they looked so miserable. I've "composted." I've "controlled" pests while also murdering garden beneficials. I've admired beautiful plants only to find them flat the next morning.

What I really needed to improve my gardening game was Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service to save me from myself and my grand ideas. Thankfully, I took the Bluebonnet Master Gardener course in 2024 and have recently solved many of my problems.

Things I wish I hadn't screwed up:

### **WATERING!**

- Plant native plants! Once established, Texas Superstar plants and other native Texas plants do not need attentive watering and are generally sustained by our normal rainfall. Excess watering can cause root rot. These plants need attentive watering only during extended periods of excessive heat.
- Water with drip irrigation everywhere you can. Nothing else is as efficient. (Our aquifers are less and less full as the years go by, so it's wise to conserve water.) Choose hoses with holes or slits at intervals, not the old soaker hose style. It is imperative to add a pressure regulator to your drip system. Lay your hoses with the slits facing up and cover with mulch. If there's a problem with your hose, you will notice much sooner since the

water will disrupt your mulch rather than eroding your soil. As water soaks into the soil, it will spread and water the roots widely, so do not be concerned if you see the mulch wet just in a line.

## VEGETABLE GARDENING!

- Plant EARLY! Our spring turns to hot summer quickly, so it's worth the risk of a freeze to get spring plants in the ground as early as mid-February. This gamble can lead to a bountiful and long tomato harvest prior to the weather turning too hot for tomato production.
- Follow the AgriLife planting schedule for your county. The schedule shows date ranges for planting most vegetables. Plant early in the suggested date range for the longest harvest. A few weeks matter!
- Plant OFTEN! Planting fresh plants/seeds every couple of weeks ensures a long harvest, especially for plants that fail easily like squash. If one plant fails, you have more maturing right behind it. This succession planting method works well for many, many plants!
- Use sturdy and LARGE trellises - like cattle panel large! When the information says a vegetable is vining, this is not a joke. They get long, long, long, fast, fast, fast. And they take over and smother your other plants. Vining emergencies happen quickly.

## COMPOSTING!

- Place SMALL pieces in your compost pile. Large or long leaves and vines do not decompose quickly. Small is key! Large pieces of organic material, even leaves, will frustrate you and look the same even after a year.

## PESTS & BENEFICIALS!

- Expect to see many insects, worms, and spiders in your garden and learn to be happy to see the ones that do not harm your plants or your harvest.
- Take action immediately to MANUALLY remove pests. Insects reproduce ridiculously quickly. Chemicals work to kill pests, but they also kill beneficials needed for pollinating and maintaining a healthy ecosystem. At the first sight of insects on garden plants, identify if they're helpful or harmful and take action. A small handheld vacuum is useful for sucking up leaf-footed bugs. A strong stream of water is useful for knocking aphids down. A black light used at night helps you find tomato worms. These worms can be relocated away from tomatoes since they will become a beneficial in their next life cycle.
- When building a new raised bed, attach fine wire to the bottom. Pocket gophers and moles CAN and WILL enter your raised beds and eat the delicious roots of your vegetable plants. Wire attached to the bottom of your new beds will prevent these pests from entering your beds from underneath.

We live in a marvelous area for gardening! We can enjoy year-round harvests and produce masses of healthy, delicious food. Learn from your mistakes like I have, refer to our local experts for information and support, and keep on gardening! Here are some great links to get you started on the right foot!

<https://washington.agrilife.org/ag/agnews/>

<https://washington.agrilife.org/ag/InI/>

<https://www.facebook.com/washingtoncountytextension>

<https://washington.agrilife.org/files/2023/08/Washington-County-Vegetable-Planting-Calendar.pdf>

<https://washington.agrilife.org/files/2023/08/Washington-County-Vegetable-Varieties.pdf>

<https://washington.agrilife.org/files/2023/08/Fall-Vegetable-Gardening-Guide.pdf>