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Ten Commandments of Fall Gardening Success

Including Vocabulary Tips for Recent Transplants to Texas !

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Fall vegetable gardening is in many ways better than its spring counterpart. Many vegetables, such as broccoli and cauliflower, seem to do best in the fall. The quality of beans, peas, root crops and many other veggies is superior when grown in the cooler days of fall. Almost anything grown in spring will do well in the fall, with the possible exception of sweet corn. I paused to reflect back over past seasons at what appear to be the most important factors in getting a fall garden off to a good start . . . and the result is the following pontification. Like the original ten, folks who think these are optional are headed for disappointment.

1. **Thou shalt not read gardening books and magazines published north of a line running from Dallas to Charleston, or West of San Antonio.**

Another way to put it is to never read a gardening book or magazine article by someone whose vocabulary doesn't include the words "y'all" (i.e., "the whole group of you'uns") and "fixin" (i.e., "about to do"). Or, if you do, let it be recreational and not to learn "how to." To take advice from another region is about as dependable as watching the Weather Channel's forecast from San Francisco, Seattle, or Newark to determine if you need to take an umbrella with you today or how to dress for working in your garden.

2. **Select Ye a Site With Full Exposure to the Sun.**

Unless you are planning on growing mushrooms, 6 to 8 hours of full sunlight is important. If you have a spot a bit too shady, try putting your leafy greens and cole crops (like broccoli) there. They will put up with less light, but even they won't like it.

3. **Prepareth the soil well before thou planteth thy crop.**

Soil (properly pronounced like the name of King David's predecessor -- Saul) is critical to plant growth. The importance of soil preparation cannot be overstressed. At least half of your success has been determined before the first seed or transplant ever hits the ground. To plop your new seeds and transplants down into the barren, parched August wasteland, among the cremated remains of your spring garden, is tantamount to a death sentence. Proper soil pH and optimum nutrition are best set before planting. Incorporate well-decomposed organic matter and fertilizer according to soil test results. In the absence of a soil test, apply 1 pound of 15-5-10 and 2 pounds of K-Mag per 100 square feet.

4. **Provideth thy garden with optimum drainage.**

Although we've been assured the "40 days and 40 nights" ordeal will not be repeated, we often experience slightly less here in Texas. Most veggies detest "wet feet." Unless your soil is very well drained, raised beds are a lifesaver. Remember, "It's easier to water a desert than to drain a swamp." When long rainy spells come in the fall, you will be glad you took the time to prepare raised beds before planting.

5. **Thou Shalt Thoroughly Water thy Plot before Planting.**

Farmers know that the single most important watering a crop receives is the one before

it's planted. Seeds germinate and grow best in soil that has already received a good deep soaking.

6. **Choose ye adapted vegetable species and varieties.**

Unless you love the challenge of growing Brussels sprouts, head lettuce, and rhubarb, avoid these and other poorly-adapted veggies. Most types of vegetables have at least a few varieties that do well here. Many even offer built-in disease and insect resistance. Here in the South, we have a short season between summer heat and the first freeze, in most years. Therefore, it is best to select early-maturing varieties (ones with short days-to-harvest intervals) to avoid having an almost-ripe bean crop freeze.

7. **Thou shalt not plant a plant too early, nor shalt thou plant it too late, but on its appointed day shalt thou plant it.**

Follow recommended planting dates closely. There is nothing more frustrating than pampering an early-September planting of corn or tomatoes through the season, only to have it "stall out" in the cool days of fall and never reach maturity before the first frost. Likewise, lettuce and spinach planted in early September will never see the light of day. We have a "window" of time in the fall when many of our warm-season veggies can effectively ripen. Planting too late is setting yourself up for disappointing results.

8. **Subject not thy tender transplants and seedlings to the infernal heat of summer.**

Your new transplants have been living the "life of Riley," with daily watering, petting, talking to, etc. Suddenly exposing these succulent unsuspecting plants to the full brunt of the scorching sun and sandblasting wind is enough to get you reported to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Plants, and is sure to result in less-than-hoped-for results. Plant seeds slightly deeper in the fall (but not over 3 or 4 times their width) and cover with a light mulch of pine needles or a lightweight row-cover blanket, to give them a slightly cooler environment in which to germinate. Covering seeds with compost rather than soil will help reduce crusting and improve germination. Protect new transplants from the sun with a homemade "lean-to" shade structure, positioned on the southwest side.

9. **Stresseth not the Growing Crops under thy Care.**

Keep your plants growing healthy and vigorous. They'll be better able to fend off problems and will produce much more. Some crops, like broccoli, never seem to "forgive and forget" if you once let them get stressed. Good nutrition, mulching (which keeps surfaces cool in the August and September heat and holds moisture), regular deep soaking, and scouting for insect and disease problems are all very important.

10. **Neglect not thy Attendance at all Extension Service Gardening Programs.**

O.K. I'm stepping out of bounds here, but there are some excellent programs throughout the year to sharpen your skills and expand your gardening savvy and compendo. We also have free informative handouts on almost any gardening subject. Take advantage of these opportunities.