Work Smarter, Not Harder, in the Garden

Although we all are itching to get into the garden and start digging, we also know that after even a little work, aches, pains and frustrations can set in. Garden fatigue can turn your May enthusiasm into July malaise. One way to spend more time harvesting, eating and enjoying your garden and less time weeding, fighting diseases, insects and animals is to work smarter, not harder. A little planning and forethought now can go a long way in reducing the amount of work you have to do to for a successful garden. And a successful garden will be one that everyone wants to participate in!

Here are some tips on working smarter, not harder this year.

- **Make A Plan**- While it may be fun to pop plants and seeds in the garden in May willy-nilly, making a plan isn't just for the uber-organized. Making a plan on paper of what plants will be planted where and how many you'll need will help you space plants properly and fit all you can into the space allotted. Too often we try to fit too many plants in our beds because we have extra seeds or plants. A plan keeps you to your word and will be a good reference. It will lead to healthier plants that need less maintenance all summer.

- **Grow the Best Varieties**- When hunting for the varieties to grow, look for ones adapted to your locale. Check regional seed companies for their recommendations. Look for varieties that will mature quickly in your area. Check for varieties that have good resistance to diseases, such as early and late blight ('Iron Lady' tomato), to reduce the need for spraying. Remember to always rotate crops, not planting the same family of vegetables in the same spot for 4 years.

- **It's All About the Soil**- I can't stress this one enough. Fertile, healthy, organic soils will be teeming with microbes that enhance water drainage and retention and nutrient availability for your plants. You'll have to use less fertilizer to correct problems, because you should have fewer of them. You'll also do less watering during droughts.

- **Raise It Up**- On all but sandy soils consider growing your plants in raised beds. Any vegetable, except potatoes and sweet corn, is easily grown in raised beds. The beds heat up faster and drain water quicker in spring. The plants can be placed closer together and you can concentrate your fertilizing, watering and weeding into a smaller area. Plus, they're more productive!

- **Water Deeply and Infrequently**- If you must water do use deeply and infrequently. Place the hose under large plants, such as tomato or squash, and let it trickle water for 5 to 10 minutes per plant so the water sinks at least 6 inches into the soil. Water row plants, such as beans and lettuce, in the morning so any moisture evaporates off the leaves before the evening. Wet leaves going into the evening can lead to diseases.

- **Weed Early and Often**- Weed between plants and on unmulched rows early and often. By weeding thoroughly in late spring and early summer, you'll kill most of the tough weeds so you'll have to do less, heavy weeding later in the season.
- **Mulch Mulch, Mulch**- To save time weeding and to save on watering, mulch your paths and around plants once they're established. For cool season crops, such as broccoli, cabbage, pea, kale, lettuce and root crops, use an organic mulch such as straw (hay has weed seeds), chopped leaves, and untreated grass clippings. These will keep the soil cool and moist, prevent weed growth and decompose to add nutrients into the soil. For warm season crops, such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, melons, squash, and sweet potatoes, consider dark plastic mulch. Plastic mulches heat the soil quickly to temperatures these crops love. Although they don't decompose to add to the soil's fertility, the plastic also prevents weeds from growing.

- **Don’t be Soft Hearted**- In our short growing season we need to succession plant to get the most out of our beds. This means not being soft-hearted and pulling out or turning under crops when they’re finished with their main harvest. Once the lettuce starts to bolt, yank it and plant root crops. Once the bush beans are mostly finished, turn them under, even if a few beans remain, to have room for a fall kale planting. If a plant has insects or disease problems that can't be fixed, it’s better to pull it than risk having it spread to other plants.

- **Give’em A Boost**- Long season vegetables, such as tomatoes and squash, benefit from a little boost of fertilizer during the growing season. Sprinkle some organic granular fertilizer around the drip line just as the plants are flowering and setting fruits to increase their yields.

- **Keep a Watchful Eye**- Visit your garden as often as possible, even for 5 minutes a day, to watch for pest problems. If you catch an insect or disease attack early you often can fix it without having to spray.

- **Put up Your Barriers**- Insects can often be thwarted with simple barriers. Cardboard collars around pepper, broccoli and basil seedlings will stop cutworms. Floating row covers over broccoli, cabbage and kale can prevent cabbageworm adult butterflies from laying eggs. Erect your barriers early in the season to stop pests before they become a problem. This especially goes for 4-legged pests such as deer, rabbits and woodchucks. Fences are the ultimate answer, but barriers help with small plantings.

- **Pick Away**- A simple way to get more produce from your garden is to stay on top of the harvesting. Many vegetables such as tomatoes, pepper, eggplant, beans, squash and cucumbers will produce more fruits if you continually pick the ripe ones. If left on the vine to get over mature, the plant will stop producing new fruits. So, pick, even if you can't use it. You can always give it away or tuck them into your neighbor's mailbox.

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