



## Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

### Garden Notes in Early Fall

#### **Gardening is a process of continuing education.**

I've had certifications in my career that required continuing education. I think it's a good idea for any vocation or avocation, and certainly for gardening. Scientific research progresses, new products come to market with claims that need to be verified, consumer preferences change over time. Every year I try to test new varieties and strategies.

#### **Benefits of successive plantings**

Planting some crops in succession gives better yield over the whole season. Corn and bush beans, for example, will produce about 10 – 12 weeks after planting, each for about a week or two. So we have long recommended planting these in batches a couple of weeks apart. I've found this works very well for cucumbers as well; adding a new plant or two every couple of weeks into mid-July extends the harvest season through September. Late-planted tomatoes give good yields into October.

#### **Peppers in containers**

New gardeners limited for space often ask about growing vegetables in pots. I figured this year I would test this with hot peppers to determine the smallest-size practical container, the best soil, the optimal watering, and the likely yield.

I planted hot peppers (including the hottest of the hot) in "five-gallon" pots (10-inch diameter, 11 inches deep) with high-nutrient soil. There are now potting soils that contain enough fertilizer to provide for a full season's growth of annual crops (guess what market these are being made for?). I intentionally grew these in part-day sun, as many of the inquiries dealt with planting on one side of the house or where sunlight was only 4 – 6 hours.

All of the smaller-fruited hot peppers I tried grew well and set heavily late in the season, with fruit ripening now. That includes familiar ones such as jalapeño and Fresno chiles in the medium-hot range, as well as the extra-hot Habañero and Thai.

This proved to be a great way to try some new peppers, just to find out how hot they are and consider them for future planting. Some examples this year:

- Aji Amarillo (from Peru and Bolivia) made beautiful fruit, medium-hot with a nice fruity flavor.
- Bishop's Crown, from Barbados, produced very attractive fruit that packed a little surprise: the flesh of the pepper is sweet, but the seeds are very hot. You can control the heat they add to any dish just by leaving or removing the seeds. Without the seeds, they're about like a Jalapeño. With them, hotter than Serrano.
- Cabai Burong, a Malaysian pepper of medium heat, was less interesting but very productive. Probably great for drying.
- Each is producing 30+ peppers. By mid-summer the pots needed water every day. No additional fertilizer was needed; color and vigor and fruit set were all good.
- Trinidad Scorpion only set a few fruit. Given its intensity (it's one of the hottest peppers in the world), that may be sufficient for all but the most ardent heat-lover.



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Larger-fruited plants such as poblano chiles were unwieldy, as the weight of the fruit caused the branches to sprawl. Staking in a pot proved challenging, and each just produced a few fruit.

As a separate experiment, sweet basil and Thai basil proved very easy in five-gallon pots so long as they got daily watering. Not so productive? Eggplant grew but couldn't seem to hold much fruit. Probably better in the garden, where their deeper root systems can support higher yields. Next year's test: tomatoes in pots. If you have a picture of tomatoes growing well in containers, send it along to the email address below.

### **Foiling gophers**

No new science available for control of this native pest. I've battled pocket gophers off and on for years, and we had settled into a sort of angry equilibrium. Then this spring a gopher took out 11 of the first 17 tomato plants I put in and I knew I had a problem again.

Good news: they're territorial. So your battle is likely with an individual gopher.

Bad news: a new gopher can move into an old gopher burrow, and their tunnels can run hundreds of feet.

Lethal measures don't work very well. Traps are hard to set, and I don't recommend baits at all due to possible harm to pets, raptors, and wildlife. If you have space, you can just keep planting, installing a large enough number of seedlings that you will have enough even with continued predation. Otherwise, physical barriers around the roots are the only sure-fire method of minimizing harm. I adopted the 'plant plenty' technique.

They have distinct food preferences. Gophers love pepper plants. Damage to tomato plants is mostly early season; as the roots get deeper they mostly leave them alone. Curiously, they don't damage corn even though they burrow actively around and among the plants.

Years ago, I gave up on one area and just started planting ornamentals. I found by trial and error, as well as from various references, that gophers don't like salvias or lavenders. Now whenever a gopher surfaces in that area, I stick in another one of those. It's getting a little crowded, but the pollinators are happy.

### **The quest for the perfect yellow tomato.**

I always try some new varieties from seed catalogues to see which ones live up to the florid prose. Two yellow/orange varieties that performed very well this year were Chef's Choice Orange F1, a hybrid, and the heirloom variety called Hillbilly.

In my continuing love affair with yellow and orange tomatoes (I use them for salsa) I have found there is quite a range of textures. Some soften very quickly (Yellow Furry Boar, Hillbilly).

Others are firm and remain intact when sliced for salads or sandwiches or chopped for fresh salsas.

Seeds by Design, located in nearby Maxwell, CA, has hit a home run with the Chef's Choice Orange F1, which was an All-America Selection in 2014. Vigorous, productive, rich flavored, and firm, each plant produced 50 – 60 fruit, mostly 12 oz. to one pound. The Chef's Choice Pink is almost absurdly productive, and the fruit is even bigger but softened faster. This is a hybrid series to watch for future releases.

### **Tomatoes for higher temperatures?**



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For years I've been telling gardeners that temperatures above 90 degrees cause tomato varieties to drop their flowers without setting fruit.

We know some varieties such as Beefsteak and Brandywine are even more sensitive to heat, dropping flowers even with temperatures in the upper 80's. Yields on those are generally very low here due to our high summer temperatures.

But some varieties did, by my observation, continue to set fruit even into the upper 90's, so their production was more consistent. This is easy to monitor, so I urge other gardeners to start compiling data on it: go out and note the locations of the flowers on the morning of a hot day. If they fail to pollinate on the first or second day, that flower falls off. As summer temperatures increase over the years, our notes can be useful information for future gardeners.

Which did well?

- Varieties that set fruit well into the upper 90's included Better Boy, Carmelo, Celebrity, Champion, and the aforementioned Chef's Choice Orange.
- All of the Wild Boar Farms varieties that I grew (Michael Pollan, Pineapple Pig, Red Boar, Sweet Carneros Pink, and Yellow Furry Boar) set well through the heat. These were introduced by local grower Brad Gates.

Some familiar varieties did not set fruit at higher temperatures. Big Beef, Brandy Boy, Early Girl, Hillbilly, and Mortgage Lifter all performed as expected with good set early and then a gap in production. Some, such as Big Beef and Early Girl, made up for this with a good late set that is ripening now.

### **How late can we pick tomatoes here?**

*There are lots of green tomatoes on my vines that are almost full size. Will they still ripen, and be as good as the ones earlier in the season?*

Short answer: we have good ripening weather well into October here. Preferred ripening range is about 55F to the upper 80's. Lower night temperatures can be ok if the daytime temperatures are warm, though the fruit may begin to spoil on the vine when fully ripe. Our harvest season off the vine extends almost through the entire month.

Tomatoes that have started to turn color can be ripened indoors. Don't put them in the windowsill; they don't need light to ripen and can actually be damaged in direct sun. Don't put tomatoes in the refrigerator, ever. Just set them on the counter and be patient. Going from 'breaker stage' to fully ripe can take several days. Better on the vine than on the counter if the weather permits.

No, they won't be quite as flavorful as a fruit that ripened on the vine in July, due to shorter days and cooler nights now. Flavor of a tomato is largely a function of solar input. But the weather is sunny here much of October.

Your backyard tomato still has great flavor at the end of the season. And it's better than anything you'll buy at the store!

### **The seasons turn, and it's time for cool-season veggies.**

*Is chicken manure a good fertilizer for my winter vegetables?*

Actually, no. Manures of any kind should not be used near leafy greens. Not because manure isn't good for the soil or the plants; chicken manure is about 3% nitrogen and releases nearly all of that steadily throughout the growing season. But with winter vegetables we are often eating leafy greens or plant parts growing close to the ground that might be eaten raw, and that is a



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health concern if manure should splash up and contaminate them. Any time you use manure, it should be incorporated into the soil.

### ***Every season I grow too much of something.***

“Remember the year Dad grew a 40-foot bed of beets?”

This year it was melons. Perhaps because I was paranoid about the gopher, I planted about twice as many plants as usual.

What can you expect from a single planting of a given type of melon?

- Watermelon: usually one or two per plant.
- Crenshaw, casaba: one or two per plant.
- Cantaloupe, honeydew, Persian melons: three to four.
- Of course, I needed to plant an old favorite, Charentais, which produces little super-aromatic fruit. About six per plant.
- And I needed to try a new variety. Turns out Da Vinci melon, a smallish Italian supermarket melon finding its way into our grocery stores and garden shelves, is very productive, yielding what I think was about six melons per plant. Hard to tell exactly, because I planted about eight plants which ran amok. It’s got a very firm texture, is very sweet and bright orange.



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- [Tomato Chefs Choice Orange.jpg](#)

Top performer this year overall. My favorite yellow/orange tomato to date, and I've tested quite a lot of them, is the new Chef's Choice Orange F1. Vigorous vines are very productive, fruit is firm, meaty, and very flavorful. Outstanding for



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salsa, popular for fresh eating, and cooks down to a rich golden puree. This looks like a winner, and in fact was an All-American Selection in 2014.



Peppers in containers:

- [pepper Aji Amarillo in container.jpg](#)

Aji Amarillo is a pepper that was mentioned to me by a customer who saw it in Peru. It proved very productive in a five-gallon pot, with lots of very attractive fruit that began ripening in August. Juicy and flavorful, it is hot but mostly 'up front' – no lingering pain.



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- [Pepper Bishop's Crown.jpg](#)

Bishop's Crown is an interesting pepper from Barbados: the fruit's flesh is sweet, but the seeds are fiery hot. So just remove them to moderate the heat. Easy in a container, producing a couple of dozen fruit per plant.



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- [Pepper Cabai Burong in pot.JPG](#)

Cabai Burong is a hot pepper from Malaysia. Very productive, good for drying.



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- [Pepper Habanero in pot.jpg](#)

Habañero, a very, very hot chile pepper, makes an excellent container ornamental even if you don't happen to want to eat the fruit. The golden orange peppers ripen



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in late September and hang into November. You should get at least a couple of dozen peppers from a single plant.



- [Pepper Jalapeño in pot.JPG](#)



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The most popular hot pepper in the United States is jalapeño, which proved quite amenable to container culture. Each plant in a five-gallon container produced about 30 fruit.



[Tomato Chefs Choice Pink early color.JPG](#)

Ready to ripen indoors. These full-size fruit of Chef's Choice Pink tomato are beginning to turn color and will readily ripen on your kitchen counter.



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- [Tomato Yellow Furry Boar from July set.JPG](#)

Some varieties of tomatoes continued to set steadily all summer, even when temperatures were in the upper 90's. The fruit on this Yellow Furry Boar (one of the Wild Boar Farms open-pollinated varieties) set in late July and ripened in mid-September.