

Sticky Willy waking up!

You can tell a lot about how much loved or hated a plant is by the number of common names it has.

Galium aparine is clearly much despised! Just from Wikipedia alone, we find common names including sweetheart, hitchhikers, cleavers, clivers, bedstraw, goosegrass, catchweed, stickyweed, sticky bob, stickybud, stickyback, sticky molly, robin-run-the-hedge, sticky willy, sticky willow, stickyjack, stickeljack, grip grass, sticky grass, bobby buttons, whippysticks, and velcro plant.

Galium germinated in fall and spent the gloomy winter months creeping slowly across the ground. By March it climbs up into shrubs, runs out over gardens, and then sets a profusion of prickly seeds which stick to clothing and fur.

Right now, we are in the window of time when a few minutes of control measures can make a big difference. Bedstraw is beginning to spread out. Pulling is not much fun, because the hairs or prickles on the leaves and stems irritate the skin. It is very fleshy and easy to chop right now.

Time to plan for the summer flower and vegetable garden.

Plan, not plant! For best results, we plant tomatoes in the garden in April, peppers and eggplant in May. But it is a good time to look for seeds of the unusual varieties you want to grow, and prep the soil.

Act now to control weeds.

The grasses and broadleaf weeds you see now sprouted with the winter rains. Most are entering their flowering stage.

Foxtails are beginning to send up their flower spikes. Root systems of annual grasses are dying back as they begin the flowering process, making them easy to pull.

For larger areas, mowing winter grasses can be quite effective, though you may need to do it two or three times.

Covering winter-growing weeds with a tarp for six weeks will kill most of them very thoroughly. Get one with grommets and secure it with tent stakes. Your area will be nearly weed-free at summer vegetable planting time.

Providing nitrogen

Many people had poor early season growth last year. Dry soil was likely a factor as we didn't have much late-season rainfall. But in many cases I think plants were lacking nitrogen.

Managing soil nutrition is especially tricky with raised garden beds. When they're installed, gardeners fill them with a mix of topsoil (usually very sandy) and enriched compost. Within a year or two the compost has broken down and nutrients have largely disappeared. Plants grow less vigorously and the soil, now mostly sand, dries out quickly. It is common for raised planter beds to have declining production after a couple of years unless the organic content and nutrients are supplemented annually.

The key nutrient for plant growth is nitrogen, which is always needed here. Compost itself usually doesn't have much in the way of plant food. Manure or other nitrogen sources such as guano can be added to compost to provide enough nutrients for a season.

The compost helps the soil retain moisture and nutrients, and the nitrogen gets the seedlings off to a good start. No need to turn them in. Just spread them on the surface and water them in. Young seedlings can also be fed with soluble plant food or fish emulsion shortly after planting.

Many people rototill or turn their soil each year. We now know this disrupts the web of organisms that live on and in roots, damaging the mycorrhizae which help with nutrient and water uptake. Keep soil disturbance to a minimum.

Irrigating vegetable and flower gardens

The majority of our trouble-shooting every summer involves irrigation problems, usually what irrigation professionals call 'deficit irrigation'. People aren't watering long enough.

The other common issue, especially (again) with raised planter beds, is water distribution.

Raised planter beds seem to need a drip emitter every 8 to 10 inches across the whole area.

Early spring is a good time to flush out your drip lines, check the emitters for output, and make sure the whole surface is getting watered each time you run your system.

What to plant this year?

Some tomato recommendations from 2025 to supplement previous years:

Each growing season I test old and new varieties for performance.

You can find our standard recommendations here:

https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/tomatoes-don-s-top-20/article_2d2acade-b8b2-59e8-ba65-fb89f9bf57db.html

Here are some possible additions, in case you don't have enough varieties already.

- Carmello was this year's surprise performer. Originally a hybrid from France, Gary Ibsen of TomatoFest grew this out ("dehybridized" it) to make an open-pollinated variety. He states that "the French Carmello is among the most productive tomatoes ever bred [with] exceptionally fine flavor". For me it yielded early and heavily and continued right through the season.
- Cosmic Burst. Brad Gates of Wild Boar Farms has a knack for selecting tomatoes with unusual colors and stripes, but flavor is his main goal. Everyone liked this one. Fruit ripens to orange with dark purple, almost black stripes. Flavor is very sweet with low acidity. Yields were great for me. You can order seed directly from Wild Boar Farms.
- The Heirloom Marriage tomatoes are crosses between popular heirloom tomato varieties that were developed by a breeding team at Pan-American seeds several years ago. Two of these have impressed me so far:

- GenuWine is a cross between Brandywine (a famous heirloom tomato) and Costoluto Genovese (a productive and meaty Italian heirloom). This hybrid gave very good early yields, had great flavor, and continued well through the summer.
- Marzinera. San Marzano is a famous sauce tomato from a specific region of Italy. Cream Sausage is a yellow sauce tomato with rich flavor. Crossing them led to a brilliant red, plump, meaty tomato with very good yield. It's a great sauce tomato, meatier than San Marzano.
- The Norfolk Purple Tomato. The first genetically modified tomato in the American market was introduced by Norfolk Healthy Produce, a company with offices here in Davis. The first variety, created by inserting a gene from a snapdragon to create purple-fleshed fruit, is now called Althaea. It gave me great yields of small, cherry-tomato size fruit on very vigorous plants. The fruit is beautiful, sweet, and mild-flavored. They have new varieties with richer flavor and larger fruit, and a vivid, orange-fruited variety rich in beta-carotene being called The Beta Tomato. Buy seeds directly from them or at select nurseries. Plant tomato seeds in early March to transplant seedlings into the garden starting in late April.

Peppers

- Pepper seedlings take 10 to 12 weeks to get to transplant size. Some general notes about peppers here:
- Hatch peppers are outstanding performers in our area, some of the best for cooking. Each plant produces 6 - 10 fruit that ripen red in October and cook to a thick sauce. There are mild, medium-hot, and hot strains. Used green, this is the basis of New Mexico green chili sauce, a regional cuisine. You'll probably need to order seed for these as they are not common in garden centers.
- Two similar peppers that are often available are Anaheim and Big Jim NuMex. The peppers looked almost identical, with Anaheim fruit just a bit smaller. Flavor the same: good taste, slight heat. Big Jim gave more fruit overall.
- Bell peppers can grow well here but are very vulnerable to sun scald on the fruit during heat waves. Temporary shading can help.

Sweet peppers with very good yields:

- **Marconi** peppers continue to impress me. Golden Marconi is especially productive. Thunderbolt is a hybrid Marconi with lots of big, sweet fruit that ripened dark red. You may need to start these from seed as they are not common in nurseries.
- **Gypsy**, a 1981 All-America Selection, is still one of the best sweet peppers after all these years. Produces early and heavily, ripens to red quickly, and keeps going well into fall. Likely to be available at garden centers as it is very popular.

- **Jimmie Nardello** is an increasingly popular sweet pepper said to be an heirloom seed strain variety of Italian "frying" pepper, also great for fresh eating. Each plant produces a couple of dozen fruit that are very flavorful.
- **Corbaci** is a Turkish heirloom sweet pepper we grew last year for the first time. Everyone loved it as it is very sweet and productive and interesting looking. Pronounced Core-botch-ee. Seed available from Baker Creek Seeds.
- **Shishito** yields great. The small plants are good in containers. About one plant in ten has very hot peppers; the other plants produce sweet fruit. This quirk is one of the reasons for their popularity; apparently, they are common bar snacks in Japan, where the sudden burst of heat leads to great hilarity.

Some hot peppers to consider:

- **Aji** peppers are great late-season performers for me. Most are very hot. They have different parentage (*Capsicum baccatum*) than sweet peppers and most other hot peppers (*Capsicum annuum*). My experience is that the plants grow later into the fall and early winter, perhaps due to their high-elevation origins. Aji Amarillo is especially attractive and productive. Start from seed as they are not commonly available as seedlings.
- Jalapeño, Fresno, and serrano are productive, familiar, medium-hot peppers. All do well here. My experience is Fresno is the most productive.
- Tabasco, the pepper used for the familiar hot sauce, is very productive, medium-hot and an interestingly attractive plant. It holds its peppers upright and continues producing very late in the season.

Cucumbers for our area

Bitterness of the fruit, and late season mildew on the vines, are the two main issues with cucumbers here.

My experience is that regular long green cucumbers have a high propensity for bitter fruit in our area. Erratic watering and high temperatures are factors in bitterness, but 'burpless' (reduced seed), Persian, and lemon cucumbers are rarely if ever, bitter.

A few that impressed me for flavor, yield, and mildew resistance include Early Spring Burpless, Lemon, Summer Dance, Tasty King, Unagi, and Persian Little Fingers.

All yielded heavily (20+ fruit per plant) and continued into the fall. Other varieties peaked out early or gradually declined due to powdery mildew.

Mow or smother your weeds and gather your seeds. Spring is on the way!

Pictures and captions



Galium aparine, commonly called bedstraw or cleavers, shown here in early February. Note that it is getting ready to flower and spread. Cut, spray, mow, pull, or smother it now!



Genuwine is an "Heirloom Marriage" tomato, a hybrid between two older heirloom types. It combines heirloom flavor with hybrid vigor and yield.



Cosmic Burst is from Brad Gates, a local farmer who has developed the Wild Boar Farms line of tomatoes. The colorful fruit has added health benefits. Yield is very good and flavor is outstanding.



Marconi peppers are sweet peppers that grow and yield well in our area, with very sweet fruit that can be eaten fresh or used in cooking. Golden marconi, shown here, is especially productive and continues producing well into the fall.



Corbaci (Core-botch-ee) is an heirloom sweet pepper from Turkey. The plants produce these long, twisted fruit that are juicy and very sweet. Yields were very good.



If you've had problems with cucumbers being bitter, grow the burpless types. They're called burpless because they have very reduced seeds; some people cannot digest cucumber seeds well. Summer Dance, shown here, yielded at least a dozen fruit per plant. Late-season mildew, a problem with many cuke varieties, was not an issue with this one.