



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Midsummer questions, critters, and herbs

What do we do about gophers?

Over a decade ago, I had a pitched battle with pocket gophers in my vegetable garden. I flooded the runs, dug out the holes, and tried gopher traps. I even tried “gopher gassers” which were fun but totally ineffectual.

As I noted in my column of July 2019¹, I lost. The gophers tunneled along, following my drip irrigation line, and eating one plant after another, decimating 30 pepper plants in 30 days. The only effective remedy I found was to line each planting hole with a gopher cage or dig out an entire area and line it with “hardware cloth” which, despite the name, is a fine mesh wire product. This was quite laborious but did protect the plant roots.

Other than that, the defeat was total. I moved my vegetable garden to an entirely new part of my farm, leaving me with a nicely laid out garden with paths and drip lines where the old garden had been.

Mint for gophers?

Rodale Press, publishers of the long-gone Organic Gardening magazine, had an off-hand comment in one of their publications that gophers don’t like members of the mint family. Mint spreads quite vigorously by runners, and I did not have any interest in filling up my garden with spearmint or peppermint. But “mint family” encompasses a lot of plants we like to grow.

What did I have to lose?

So, I began planting those spots with culinary and ornamental members of *Lamiaceae*, the mint family. Lavender, catmint, lemon balm, ornamental and native and kitchen sages, germander, and more.

Lo and behold, despite gophers passing through the area, leaving their telltale mounds of soil and surfacing periodically, they left these new plants alone.

This is anecdotal. I do not have peer-reviewed published studies showing that gophers don’t eat members of the mint family. Your mileage may vary.

But “the mint family” does give a gardener a lot to work with. And it includes our most popular kitchen herb: basil.

Sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is a summer annual grown worldwide.

Genovese basil is a type of sweet basil grown in Italy, especially in the northern Italian region of Genoa. It is the type of sweet basil most commonly sold in garden centers in our area.

¹ https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/of-gophers-and-lavender/article_b839b662-2271-5809-b2cb-295877d7af64.html



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Genovese basil is the type traditionally used to make pesto sauce, an intense flavor experience comprised of basil, walnuts or pine nuts, and high-quality olive oil. Or walnut oil. And parmesan cheese, sometimes. And garlic, also sometimes. And sometimes even butter and cream. Suffice to say, pesto recipes are variable and range from creamy sauces to nutty, oily pastes. The common theme is the powerfully sweet, pungent aroma and flavor of crushed fresh basil leaves, picked at their peak of flavor.

Sweet basil is also a common ingredient in marinara sauce, along with oregano and garlic, in the tomato sauce probably most familiar to Americans as we use it on spaghetti and pizza.

While sweet basil is basic to Mediterranean cuisine, it is native to Africa and Asia. Genovese basil is just the most common type. There are other varieties in the species *Ocimum basilicum*, as well as lots of other species of *Ocimum* around the world, including a few that we use as herbs such as Thai basil and holy basil. Most are tropical plants, meaning they are tender to frost, so we grow them as annuals.

How to grow basil

Basil loves sun and warm temperatures. It is grown as an agricultural crop in California, the American Southwest, and Florida. All those regions have long growing seasons which allow farmers to harvest two to five times through the summer. You can as well! Basil is very easy for gardeners to grow.

Plant it any time between April and mid-summer. It wants full sun and regular watering and can be harvested any time between May and November in our area. No special fertilizer is needed. Basil plants are easiest to grow in an open garden bed where they'll have plenty of root area. It is possible to grow them in containers, but, as with all container gardening in our hot, dry climate, the bigger the pots the better. In my experience they need at least one cubic foot of soil. Having said that, many people buy little plants of basil and keep them going for a few weeks in a window or on a porch.

The problem with basil is that it keeps trying to flower, and the leaves are said to turn somewhat bitter when it does. The flowers of all types of basil are very attractive to bees, butterflies, and other pollinators and beneficial insects. But since basil is grown for the tender new shoots and leaves, gardeners are told to pinch off the flowers as they try to develop. That's tedious. Successive plantings every 4 – 6 weeks can keep a good crop coming while you allow the older plants to bloom.

Another option is to look for some of the new introductions from plant breeders with delayed flowering. Emerald Towers is a new variety with a columnar growth habit. Flowering is said to be "delayed" by 8 – 12 weeks, but my plants have never flowered in the last three seasons. They produced right into November. The flavor is very much like Genovese.

Fun fact: you can put fresh-cut or purchased fresh basil into a vase of water, and it will stay fresh for several days. It may even root for you.

Other herbs in the mint family



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Oregano and marjoram

Interesting fact: oregano and sweet marjoram are almost the same plant.

Technically, oregano is *Origanum vulgare* and sweet marjoram is *Origanum majoranum*. Both are native to the Mediterranean and have been basic to Italian and French cuisine for centuries. Both are also quite easy to grow here. Unlike basil, they are cold-hardy perennials.

Once we received two flats, one of each, from our herb grower that arrived without labels.

“We can’t tell them apart,” I told the grower.

She laughed. “Neither can we, especially when they’re young. When they grow out, the oregano has a stronger flavor. Until then, good luck!”

One big difference: sweet marjoram spreads slowly and scarcely reseeds, while oregano spreads vigorously and reseeds quite freely. I have a patch of oregano about ten feet across after a decade.

There are ornamental varieties of oregano that have showy flowers. All oregano and marjoram flowers are attractive to many insects, including butterflies.

Speaking of herbs

“Can you give me some pointers on growing cilantro? I’m trying to grow herbs indoors.”

Sad to say, my first pointer would be to not try to grow cilantro indoors. It’s also not happy outdoors in hot weather. Cilantro is a cool-season annual herb for us. In coastal California, they can grow it year-around.

Plant cilantro here starting in October and do successive plantings through about February. If it gets stressed, or we have unusually warm weather, it will flower. Don’t panic, you can still use the flowers, or save the seeds which are coriander (same plant, different part eaten, different name).

Cilantro is in the celery family (*Apiaceae*, formerly *Umbelliferae*). All members of that plant family have flowers that are exceptionally attractive to pollinating insects and other beneficials. So just let it go when it starts to bloom to encourage the wildlife, and plant some more for yourself.

Other herbs indoors?

Simply put, your light indoors is too low for herbs. Most will simply decline at varying rates once you bring them inside. Supplementing the light with grow lights can help somewhat.

But herbs can be grown packed together in a large barrel or trough, just outside the back door. Full sun is best but light shade is okay. They need to be trimmed and replenished periodically, or some will outgrow the others. Herbs such as oregano, marjoram, rosemary, and culinary sage are hardy evergreen outdoor shrubs or perennials. Parsley is a biennial, blooming the second year from planting. French tarragon and chives are deciduous perennials, meaning they are gone in the winter but regrow each spring.

More varmints



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Any suggestions for dealing with squirrels or rats that are eating my tomatoes? They get them just when they're ripe!

Short of lethal measures, most gardeners just use barriers, though that's easier said than done with tree squirrels and roof rats (also called tree rats).

These agile animals come in from above, moving readily from trees to rooftops to fences and into your garden. They do not want to be exposed to the open sky, where their main predators are. Owls and hawks are your best allies against mammalian pests. Never use baits or poisons. Encourage owl boxes in your neighborhood.

Siting your garden further from the fence can reduce the damage. Pruning shrubs and trees away from the fence and roofline makes it harder for them to scamper along. One pest control operator suggested putting carpet tack strips (tacks pointing up) along the fence runners. One gardener lines the top of her fence with rose prunings. Leaving a nearby porch light on at night may deter the tree rats.

Harvest early

One easy tactic that gets more fruit to the table intact is simply picking early. This also helps prevent sun scald on the fruit if a heat wave is imminent. Just pick the tomato once it is at or past the 'breaker stage', meaning that it has begun to turn lighter green. I usually wait until the fruit is just turning yellow.

Tomatoes will ripen fully on your kitchen counter in just a few days.



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The valley pocket gopher is a serious pest of crops and garden plants in California. Native to the western United States, it spends 90% of its life in an underground burrow. Highly adaptable to different soil types, they have a marked preference for soil softened by irrigation. Gophers do seem to have some preferences for and against certain plant types, and anecdotally appear to be averse to members of the mint family.



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It's usually pretty easy to tell when you have a gopher problem. The cleanout mounds are created as they tunnel through your yard. For traps, you need to find the open "working" holes where they go in and out. Gopher snakes will find those holes as well.



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Some types of basil are grown as ornamental garden plants for their showy flowers, which attract butterflies and bees. This is a variety of Thai basil. The leaves, used in Thai cooking, have a stronger, spicier flavor than sweet basil.



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Emerald Towers is a new hybrid basil that has very delayed flowering, allowing for a much longer harvest season. The plants shown here are two months old. Flavor is like Genovese basil, great for pesto and marinara sauces.



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Genuwine variety of tomato, three days on the counter. Picking tomato fruit before it is fully red and soft-ripe can help escape damage from sun scald and critters. Once the fruit is beginning to turn yellow, it will ripen fully off the vine. Don't refrigerate the fruit; just leave it on the kitchen counter and it will be ripe within a few days.

Genuwine is a new hybrid between two familiar heirloom types (Costoluto Genovese and Brandywine) that I am trialing this season. So far, so good.