



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Summer vegetable season is nearly upon us!

One of the most useful suggestions made to me as a young gardener was to keep a journal. Note what did well, what didn't, how the seasons differed from year to year (2013: "42 watermelon plants are more than any human needs to grow...."). You'll notice consistent performers and erratic ones over time. Especially with tomatoes, the number of varieties to choose from can be overwhelming, so keeping records of performance can help guide your choices in spring.

How was 2023 in the vegetable garden?

- The heaviest producing variety for me, once again, was Juliet tomato. I decided to track the numbers and stopped counting at 400 fruits, and I picked another hundred in late October as I cut the plant down to make room for winter vegetables.
- For sauce tomatoes it was a close race between San Marzano and Rugby, a new contender that has much larger, meatier fruit. For a regular medium-size red tomato, long-time favorite Early Girl was great as usual, but New Girl out-yielded her for the second year and the flavor was outstanding.
- There's always a surprise. I always grow some heirloom tomato varieties despite their capricious yields. Most heirloom tomatoes, selected as regional favorites in our midwestern states, aren't well adapted to our hot, dry summers. But each summer one surprises me. In 2022 it was Cherokee Purple, a 100-year-old variety said to have originated with the Cherokee Nation. It's not actually purple, more of a dusky brown red, with dark red flesh. Usually I get 25 – 30 fruits on this one, but two years ago it produced about 80 fruit! In 2023 the surprise was Pineapple, a rich-flavored heirloom variety with very large fruit. It's a beautiful yellow-orange fruit with streaks of red in the peel and flesh. Most years I get a half-dozen fruit. Last summer it produced about 15, each at least a pound and a half.
- I always grow something weird, just for fun. Last year it was Reisetomate, a strangely mutated tomato whose fruit resembles a red cluster of grapes. Tart, seedy, but exceptionally flavorful, it yielded prodigiously and made outstanding sauce.

Is there a truly purple tomato? Conventional breeders have been working to increase the anthocyanin content of tomato fruit for years, with several varieties that have dark blue, indigo, or even almost-black skin. But no tomatoes bred conventionally have had purple flesh. Enter Norfolk Plant Sciences with their Purple Tomato, whose rich purple flesh was created by inserting a gene from purple snapdragons. For the first time in the US, genetically modified vegetable seeds were available to home gardeners this year. They sold the seed online at \$2.00 each, but sales closed March 17.

Keep it simple!

I get a lot of new gardeners who just want to know "what are the best tomatoes to grow here?"



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My standard advice: diversify your portfolio.

- Grow a couple of hybrids for reliable yield and disease resistance. Early Girl or New Girl, Better Boy, or Champion, all the Chef's Choice varieties (especially Chef's Choice Orange), and Ace are among many proven varieties for this area.
- Grow at least one small-fruited type such as Sun Gold, Sweet 100, or Juliet. Cherry tomatoes are foolproof and great for beginners. They produce hundreds of fruit under good conditions, and at least dozens even under marginal conditions.
- Sauce tomatoes are generally outstanding here (canning tomatoes are still Yolo County's #1 crop). Roma is popular and is a compact grower, but there are lots of new options in this category.
- If you want to grow heirloom tomatoes, try locally tested types such as Mortgage Lifter or Pineapple. Stay away from Brandywine and Beefsteak, which don't yield well here.
- Try something new to your family: an heirloom Italian type such as Costoluto Genovese, or the compact little Principe Borghese that's great for sun-drying. Look for some of the Wild Boar Farms varieties that were developed locally by farmer Brad Gates, or something that grumpy old guy says is the "best tomato you'll ever eat." You may find new varieties to add to your must-grow list.

When to plant?

The arrival of plants in hardware stores and garden centers isn't an indication of planting time. Many start to stock early for those intrepid gardeners who like to shelter their plants from cold nights or transplant them to grow them along for later planting. Tomatoes like to go into warm soil, and peppers and eggplants need really warm soil.

For best results, we plant tomatoes in April and peppers and eggplants in May. All can be planted through May and even into June. We have a very long growing season here. Soil temperatures should be at least 60 degrees for tomatoes and 70 degrees for the others.

What can we plant now, and what's the planting sequence?

Green beans are tolerant of colder soil and not very tolerant of high summer temperatures. My journals indicate best harvest of green beans in June from plants or seeds planted in late March or April, and in October from August planting. Mid-summer beans grow but tend not to set well. Potatoes are also planted in March.

By late April you can also plant your tomatoes, older types of corn, summer squash, cucumbers, and sunflowers.

May is really our most active vegetable gardening month.

In early May we can start planting sweet and mildly hot peppers and eggplants. With soil warmer it's okay to plant the extra-sweet corn varieties, and you can continue planting corn every couple of weeks through June. Basil loves heat and is best planted starting in May.



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In late May to early June, we plant winter squash (a confusing name applied to squash types that are picked in late fall and stored into the winter), musk melons and pumpkins. These take a lot of space! At the end of May and into June we plant watermelons and okra, both of which need very warm soil. This is when the super-hot peppers such as habañero and ghost peppers go in; they cannot tolerate cold soil.

Don't fret if your neighbor's garden is planted before yours is. I have had very good results planting all the way through June.

Manage weeds, plant flowers

Want to start early? Pull or chop weeds now while the soil is still soft and moist. Smother bigger areas with a tarp for a few weeks to kill the winter weeds. Spread out some compost or manure over the garden beds. Check your irrigation systems for coverage. If you bought plants early, keep them moving so they don't get rootbound: transplant them to bigger pots and keep them in a warm location.

One of the simplest practices I've adopted in recent years to build the soil and manage summer weeds is a liberal application of straw mulch, installed just after the seedlings are put in the ground. Several inches of straw mulch will shade out most summer weeds, retain moisture, and gradually decompose into compost. You can buy straw locally or just grow your own in the winter: oats and field peas grown as a winter cover crop can be used as homegrown straw mulch in the summer garden.

Don't forget to plant some flowers in your vegetable garden! It makes it more inviting – not just for you but for beneficial insects as well. Marigolds are popular in vegetable gardens due to a long-standing belief (myth, actually) that they help protect the other plants there. They do attract butterflies and other 'good' insects. But over the years I've gravitated to cosmos, zinnias, sunflowers, and annual salvias in my vegetable garden because of their abundance of blooms and the wide range of pollinators and entomophagous creatures they attract.



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Pineapple is an aptly-named heirloom variety as it has a rich flavor with a lot of tang. Fruit are very large, up to two pounds.



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Year after year, Juliet tomato is a reliable, productive hybrid. The fruit picks easily, freezes well, and has a meaty, solid flesh that's great for sauce, salsa, or just fresh eating. Highly recommended.



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Weird, productive plant with very rich and somewhat acidic fruit: Reisetomate is an heirloom tomato ostensibly originating from Germany. Initial results are favorable here: I counted over 80 fruit!



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Planting flowers in your vegetable garden has a purpose: to draw pollinators and other beneficial insects (and hummingbirds) in to help increase yields and reduce pests. Zinnias come in heights ranging from a foot tall to as much as four feet. Benary Giant zinnia, shown here, blooms from mid-summer until frost.