



## Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

### Top Tips for New Gardeners

It's spring! Never mind that frost we had last week. The days are sunny and pretty, and budding gardeners are emerging.

*Hi Don!*

*What are your top tips for newbie veggie gardeners who want to plant their first garden this spring?*

*Also, do you have any suggestions for the easiest veggies to grow that you recommend to beginning backyard farmers?*

Top three tips:

#### **1. Plant at the right time, in the right place.**

Our summer vegetables are subtropical and tropical heat-lovers that need warm soil.

The first sunny day in February brings out gardeners looking for vegetable starts. There's no benefit to early planting. For best results, we plant tomatoes in April, peppers and eggplants in May.

It's not that we're worried about frost at this point, although we did have a significant frost less than two weeks ago. Frost is probably behind us now. But when a tropical plant is exposed to temperatures in the 40's there is internal damage. The young plant begins to shed roots and leaves and is set back by several days. So each cold night slows down the plant's growth.

In the case of tomatoes, the little plant can recover pretty quickly. Same for beans and squash.

We're almost warm enough for tomatoes now, but it's still much too cool at night for peppers, eggplant, melons and okra. They will be stunted all season if the young plants experience cold soil or chilly nights.

If you plant early, you need to use measures such as seedling blankets to keep the air around the seedlings warm and to try to get the soil as warm as possible.

The right place is the sunniest location you have, at least 4 to 6 hours of sun.

#### **2. Amend the soil.**

The first time you plant, turn in some good quality compost and some organic fertilizer or manure. It helps the roots get established, keeps moisture and nutrients in the root zone, and makes it easier for seeds to sprout. Spread a couple of inches over the top of your garden and turn it in a few inches deep.

You really don't need to amend the soil in subsequent years. Just keep putting layers of mulch on the surface (see below) and the worms will do the work for you.

#### **3. Make it easy to water, and water thoroughly when you do.**

Vegetable gardens require a lot of water. A simple drip or soaker system makes it a lot easier for you to give them what they need. It doesn't have to be fancy and can just hook up to your hose.

Water deeply. Probably the most common issues we see in early summer all have to do with watering too often, and not long enough.



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### **4. Shower your plants.**

Don't worry too much about pests when you find them. Get them identified at the garden center and learn what to expect. Most insects you see are harmless, and some are beneficial. Many pests such as aphids can simply be rinsed off and will gradually be controlled by natural predators. Wash your plants off periodically, really vigorously. It's the simplest way to manage whiteflies, spider mites and aphids. You won't hurt the plants with a vigorous rinse.

### **5. Weed early and often.**

A few minutes with a hoe on a warm afternoon can be very satisfying. Most weeds are readily controlled in the seedling stage. Some can just be buried with mulch. Five minutes of weeding in June prevents an hour of weeding in August. A few types may need stronger measures, so get them identified so you can decide on the best strategy.

### **6. Go vertical!**

A tomato plant is a vigorous vine, with most having the potential to grow to ten to twelve feet or more. The fruit needs to be up off the ground, so stake and cage the plant. The very best time to put a stake and cage on your tomato plant is when you plant it. I use concrete wire, at least 5 to 6 feet tall, and use a sturdy stake to hold it up. Cucumbers and beans also climb.

### **7. Feed the young plants.**

Young vegetable and flower plants always benefit from nitrogen. You can use enriched planting compost or manure when you plant, or give them some plant food after they've settled in. Add plant food each season.

### **8. Mulch your garden.**

Mulch is any type of material that you put on top of the soil, not something you mix into the soil. It cools the roots, and slowly disintegrates as earthworms and soil organisms convert it to humus. It can be bark, wood chips, coarse compost, straw or hay, shavings, leaves, lawn clippings. Adding at least a couple of inches of mulch on the soil is always beneficial after you plant. It conserves moisture, makes nutrients available to the plant, smothers weeds, and makes the soil looser and easier to work with as it breaks down.

You can buy bark by the cubic yard from the local rock yard, or by the bag at garden centers, or ask a tree service to dump their ground prunings at your driveway. One cubic yard of mulch is enough to cover 160 square feet to a depth of two inches. One 2 cubic foot bag will cover 12 square feet to two inches.

### **9. It's easier to start with plants than seeds.**

*"I have a problem with my tomato seedlings. They come up, and then as the next leaves are coming on they fall over, and they look like they rot at the ground, and they die."*

Growing things from seed can be fun, but your indoor environment is really not optimal. I'm always afraid that a beginning gardener will be disappointed and give up because of seedling failure. The light indoors isn't bright enough, and the seedlings end up sprawling and stretching toward the window. In lower-light conditions, seedlings are very vulnerable to damping-off fungus diseases, which kill the seedlings rapidly.



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Sunlight and air are the mortal enemies of fungus! If possible, move the seedling trays outside to a sheltered but sunny location during the day, and back inside at night. Air movement helps thicken the plant stems as well as preventing diseases.

Use grow lights indoors if you really get serious about all of this. But most of the things you want to grow are likely to be available as young plants at the garden center or hardware store.

### **10. Don't try to grow food plants indoors.**

Headline sent to me: *"Try growing some of the following edibles indoors to ward off the winter blues and get your gardening fix this year."*

Personally, I would get serious blues watching vegetable plants die indoors. For the record, their choices were tomatoes, bell peppers, potatoes (?!), beans, carrots, radishes, spinach and about eight other totally unrealistic options. Plus microgreens, sprouts, and mushrooms, which at least are plausible. Your indoor environment is really not suitable for vegetables and herbs. The light is too low and pest problems can multiply really rapidly.

My daughter is a basil enthusiast, but she lives in a brownstone in NYC. She plants seeds, they sprout, then sprawl and die. Her determination is inspiring.

*"How many times have you tried to grow basil in your window?"*

*"Three times, and it failed each time. But I think I've got this figured out, Dad!"*

That's the spirit.

### **10.a. The internet is full of nonsense.**

Of course, there's great info online as well, but it's hard to separate the wheat from the chaff. We sure do spend a lot of time swatting down the latest weird internet miracle solution (epsom salts! hydrogen peroxide! vinegar!) and debunking photo-shopped rainbow-colored strawberries, tomatoes, and roses. Hint: if it's not a color you've ever actually seen in a fruit or flower, it's probably fake. If a household product is being suggested for plant food or pest control, don't do it.

### **11. Gardening is local.**

That Beefsteak tomato that did great for your uncle in Ohio won't do well here because of our summer heat. Ask locally and be cautious about buying the hype from mail-order vendors.

Our seasons are completely different in lowland California than most other regions. There are many vegetables we plant in fall and mid-winter (broccoli, kale lettuce, peas, spinach, etc.), and our summer vegetables continue to yield well into November. Our summer heat is great for some types.

Interesting factoid: Sacramento is the sunniest city on earth from June through September. With the complete absence of cloudy weather here in summer and fall, we have one of the longest growing seasons anywhere. Lots of people gave up too early last year after June and July heat inhibited fruit set on their tomatoes. Keep watering. Our biggest harvest is often in late September and October.

### **12. Plant flowers near your vegetables.**

They draw natural predators and pollinators and people. I really suggest checking on your plants every day, and flowers make the garden a more inviting place to stroll in the evening.



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What's easy? Sunflowers, cosmos, lobelia, Salvia Victoria, sweet alyssum, the new low-growing zinnias, just to name a few.

### **About those easiest veggies to grow?**

It's hard to go wrong with a Juliet tomato, or any cherry tomato, some basil plants (keep planting every few weeks; you'll use it and even if you don't the bees love the flowers), and a patty pan squash. If they all work out, you've got a great combination to sauté in olive oil. If the patty pans get too big, they make great table decorations.

If you have questions or topic suggestions for a future column, you can send them to [donshor@gmail.com](mailto:donshor@gmail.com).

*Happy spring!*



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I used to recommend removing the flowers from basil, but I no longer bother with that. They're attractive, the plant continues to grow, and bees love the blooms. I continue to plant basil every few weeks here and there in the garden to ensure an abundant supply. Shown here is Thai basil, which has a spicier flavor.



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Sunburst patty pan squash is one of my favorites. It keeps firm texture longer than zucchini and is more reliably productive in hot weather. The golden color allows you to see the fruit before it gets too big. And if you do let them go, they make strange and attractive decorations.



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Every beginning gardener should plant one small-fruited type of tomato. Juliet is a great performer, yielding hundreds of small meaty fruit that you can use in salads or cook for sauce. But any cherry tomato is likely to perform well.



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A large and secure tomato cage is the key to having an orderly garden late in the summer. Most tomato varieties are vines that grow to 8 feet or more and will swamp the rest of your garden if they aren't contained. Put the cage on when you plant, and use a secure stake.



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Learn to recognize the good guys in your garden! This is the larva of a ladybird beetle (ladybug). They eat aphids! On my property they overwinter on native sage plants, and I find them in the wild grasses.



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Leatherwing beetles are voracious aphid eaters. They're among the most effective beneficial insects in your garden. A garden with lots of winter leaf piles, and with plants flowering year-around, will draw beneficial insects that help keep pests under control.