



Organic Vegetable Garden Maintenance in the Community & School Garden

Watering:

- ❖ Before watering, always check soil moisture “at the root zone,” being careful not to damage your plants’ roots as you dig. For small seedlings with roots in the top 1"-2" of soil, it’s time to water if that zone is dry. For large established plants, dig deeper: if the soil is moist in their root zone 6"-12" below the surface, they will be fine.
- ❖ When watering, soak the soil deeply. Avoid watering the soil to only a couple inches; plants will have difficulty developing deep roots if the only moisture available is on the surface of the soil. And, shallow watering will dry out more often, creating stress on the plants.
- ❖ Check your garden weekly for its watering needs. Plants transpire (lose) more water during *dry* (low humidity) weather, including cool days. During hot and dry weather, they may need a deep watering more often.
- ❖ Cultivate the soil before watering, when possible. Loose, aerated soil more easily absorbs water. Water slowly and gently. Avoid “making puddles” as these tend to dry into a hardened soil surface, limiting the availability of air to the plants’ root zone.
- ❖ Water early in the day, when temperature is low and water will be absorbed (not evaporate). Watering late in the day creates opportunities for plants to become diseased.

Mulching:

- ❖ Spread a 3"-4" layer of mulch over beds to reduce loss of water from the soil and to suppress weed growth.
- ❖ Look for sources of organic mulches (grass clippings, shredded leaves, straw, compost, etc). Organic mulches add nutrients to the soil and build soil structure, as well as reduce water loss and suppress weeds.
- ❖ Newspaper (black and white print) or plastic mulch can also be used. It is recommended that these be laid out before planting.

Fertilizing:

- ❖ Add any fertilizer and soil amendment (such as garden limestone) according to your soil test results/recommendations. To do otherwise is a waste of time, money and may be detrimental to your garden soil.
- ❖ Use organic (such as compost) fertilizer. Compost makes an excellent, slow release complete fertilizer (often near 1-1-1 ratio.) If you use an organic fertilizer product, use only the amounts recommended. More is not better; more fertilizer in the soil than the plants need simply runs off as a nitrate (salt), contaminating our water table. If you a lot of replanting throughout the season, your soil may need a side dressing of fertilizer before the growing season is over.

Weeding:

- ❖ Weeds are “a plant out of place.” Sometimes they are merely plants we are unfamiliar with, but may be native plant species, invasive plant species, wildflowers, etc. Get to know what plants are un-invited guests in your garden: some may be edible, some may attract beneficial insects, some may be noxious weeds, etc.
- ❖ Weeds compete for water, nutrients, space and light. Try to remember the importance of this when it is 90 F with 80% humidity on a summer’s day and your garden needs weeding

- ❖ Weed your garden during the coolest parts of the day. As you weed you will disrupt other plant roots. If this happens during a 90 F, 80% humidity day, your plants will get shocked and will wilt.
- ❖ Regular, weekly weeding keeps weeds under control. Two things to remember about weeds:
 - There is a new “collection” of weeds all summer long: some are spring growers, some mid-summer growers, some show up in the fall.
 - Weeds create a “seed bank.” Weeds that have gone to seed may sprout some of their seeds over a period of years. One weed gone to seed may make little weeds you’ll have to deal with for several years!
- ❖ Remove all of the weed, including the roots.
- ❖ It is easiest to pull weeds out when the soil is soft and slightly moist, such as after a good rain or deep watering.

Pest Problems (critters, diseases, weeds):

- ❖ Keep garden debris cleaned up!! Sanitation is an effective, safe control for pest problems.
- ❖ Clear out weeds that attract pest critters (not all pests are insects); keep a border of plants that attract beneficial critters.
- ❖ Rotate crops (not the soil) each year to prevent build up of pests and pathogens.
- ❖ Use mulch to keep soil from splashing onto leaves; this is how many fungal and bacterial problems start.
- ❖ Water deeply, regularly and early in the day to encourage healthy plants.
- ❖ Plant disease-resistant varieties and follow other good gardening guidelines to avoid plant disease problems.
- ❖ Avoid putting any diseased plant material in to a small composting site. Bag and remove diseased plant material from the garden.

Harvesting, Trimming, Deadheading & Pruning:

- ❖ Harvest in a timely fashion. This discourages vandalism, wasted produce and minimizes the attraction of pests to your garden.
- ❖ Remove brown, graying or dying and dead leaves and plant parts at any time to prevent the spread of disease or rot.
- ❖ If you have annual and perennial flowers in your garden, cut off any dead flowers. This is known as “deadheading.” Deadheading will encourage continuous flowering throughout the season on most annual and some perennial flowers. It will allow perennial flowers (including bulbs) to store energy in the roots for next year’s bloom.
- ❖ If you have small shrubs, trees or vines in the garden, you can prune any damaged, diseased or dead branches at any time.
- ❖ Flowering shrubs, trees and vines (including flowering fruit): most varieties are best pruned right after blooming time.
- ❖ Evergreen shrubs, trees or vines: prune during late winter or early spring.
- ❖ Edible fruit shrubs, trees or vines: prune during late winter or early spring.

