

Look out, gardeners, here comes the harvest

The trickle of garden produce turns to a veritable flood in August. But the vegetable garden isn't the only feature of the landscape to demand attention. Michigan State University Extension specialists suggest the following chores are timely.

Take cuttings from coleus, fuschia, impatiens, begonia and geraniums to grow indoors this winter. Take more cuttings than you think you need or want to make up for those that don't form roots.

Encourage dahlias to produce larger flowers by removing some of the lateral buds and thinning some of the side shoots. Stake and tie the tall plants as necessary.

Begin preparing beds for spring-flowering bulbs and order bulbs for late fall planting. Plant day lilies and peonies. Divide and replant crowded iris, peonies and lilies if you haven't already done so.

Cut back the foliage of perennials when it begins to die. Pinch the faded flowers and seed heads from annual flowers to keep them producing blossoms until frost.

Watch tomatoes for tomato hornworms and cole crops for cabbage worms and loopers. Hand picking is often sufficient to control hornworms; for caterpillars on cole crops, try spraying

with *Bacillus thuringiensis*. This is bacterial disease of caterpillars sold under the trade names Dipel and Thuricide. If tomatoes succumb to wilt diseases this year, make a note to purchase only wilt-resistant varieties next year and to plant tomatoes and their close relatives — peppers, eggplant and potatoes — where these crops and strawberries did not grow this year.

Whiten heads of cauliflower by wrapping the leaves around them when heads are 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Harvest when heads reach 6 inches. Heads left to covered too long, especially in warm humid weather, may rot. Self-blanching green and purple cauliflower varieties don't need this treatment.

Prune and destroy raspberry and blackberry canes that bore fruit this year. The will not bear again but could harbor insects and disease organisms. Check trees and shrubs planted within the last couple of years to make sure they are not being girdled by guy wires or ropes. Wire, plastic, nylon rope and other nondegrading materials should always be removed from the root ball, trunk and/or main stems at planting time.

Avoid fertilizing trees and shrubs now. This would stimulate a flush of new growth that would not have time to harden off before winter.

garden tips

Harvesting corn, drying fruits

A day of gardening that doesn't generate at least one question is as rare as a garden without weeds. Michigan State University Extension specialists answer questions generated by Michigan gardeners in August:

Somehow I've avoided all the usual sweet corn problems — moles, borers, raccoons, smut, etc. — but I've realized I don't know how to tell when the corn is ready to harvest. What do I look for?

Watch for the cobs to get dry and turn brown. Then carefully peel back the husks and check the color and size of the kernels. Unless you're growing a white variety, kernels should be plump and a rich, golden yellow. Then puncture a kernel or two with your thumbnail. If the liquid inside is milky, the corn is ready to pick. If it's watery, the corn is still immature. And if the kernels are doughy, the corn is past its prime.

My first sweet corn had very poorly filled out ears. What could have been the cause of this? Partially filled ears of corn are caused by bad weather at pollination time or by planting corn in long rows rather than blocks.

I'm interested in drying fruits and vegetables, but I've heard that solar drying in Michigan is impractical and that dehydrating using electricity is uneconomical. I also read that drying results in loss of some of the major nutrients in fruits and vegetables. Should I give up on the idea of drying? It's your decision, of course. But it could be pointed out that most research on nutrient loss was done with dryers powered by light bulbs — the nutrient loss could have occurred as a result of the exposure to light rather than the drying process.

Even if you do lose some nutrients, you're probably better off eating handful of dried apricots or zucchini, for instance, than a bowl of potato chips. If you look at drying as a hobby that produces substitutes for junk food snacks rather than as an economical method of preserving large quantities of food that will form a major portion of your winter diet, you can make a case for it.

There are energy costs, of course, and they can be substantial if you're drying food in the oven. You need to take these into consideration, too.

What causes bitter cucumbers? How can some cucumbers on a plant be bitter while others are not? Some varieties tend to be more-bitter than others, but weather and solid fertility seem important

too. Anything that places that plants under stress — such as low soil fertility, high temperatures or drought — can lead to bitter fruits.

Watering, mulching and fertilizing cucumber plants should reduce the likelihood of bitterness. If some are bitter, peel them a little more deeply than usual — the bitterness is generally associated with the skin.

My neighbor says trimming the leaves from tomato and muskmelon plants makes the fruits ripen better because it exposes them to sunlight. Is this true?

This practice is not recommended, for a couple of reasons. The main reason is that fruit ripening is due mainly to temperature rather than light. Another is that, through photosynthesis, the leaves produce the food that goes into the developing fruits.

Removing the leaves cuts back the plant's ability to produce sugar and so limits its ability to produce fruit. Removing the leaves from tomato plants may also lead to sunscald injury in the fruits.

A neighbor of mine planted some peach pits a couple of years ago and now has quite a few little peach trees growing. What are the chances that he'll get fruit off of them someday?

He may eventually harvest some peaches, but chances are they won't be much like the high quality fruits that produced the pits he planted. The stone fruits — including plums, peaches, apricots and cherries — do not come true from seed.

Commercially, they are propagated by taking cuttings of top varieties and grafting them onto superior rootstocks. This brings trees into production more quickly and guarantees that the desirable qualities of each variety are maintained and passed on from parent plant to offspring.

My early broccoli (planted in April) is always excellent, but my fall crop is invariably wormy. Is there anything I can do to prevent this that doesn't require the use of chemical pesticides?

Try spraying your fall cole crops frequently with a solution of Dipel or Thuricide. These are trade names for *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterial disease of caterpillars. Unlike chemical pesticides, it leaves no toxic residue, so you can use it right up to harvest.

It won't affect aphids and other pests, but it does stop the feeding of caterpillars almost immediately and it kills them in a day or two.

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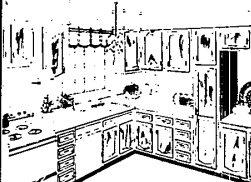
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