

Garden Corner

or everything you ever wanted to know about gardens but were afraid to ask

Michigan State University extension specialists answer timely questions on vegetable gardening, insects, houseplants and related topics.

Q. Why are my cucumbers so bitter?

A. Blame it on the weather. A sharp drop in temperatures after a warm spell will cause cucumbers to develop a bitter flavor.

Q. I recently bought a houseplant book that advises keeping a lot of plants evenly moist but not soaking wet. How's a person supposed to do this? You have to add water occasionally, so surely the soil is going to be more moist at some times than at others.

A. Water most houseplants when the soil surface or the top inch or so of soil is dry. This will keep the soil around the plant roots moist without satu-

rating it to the extent that the roots can't breathe.

Q. Some of my cucumbers are bottle-shaped. What happened?

A. Poor pollination will cause misshapen cucumbers. This usually occurs because cool weather limits the activity of bees that carry pollen from the male to the female flowers. Using pesticides while bees are active will reduce the bee population, also resulting in poor pollination and malformed fruits.

Q. I'm so disappointed in my first tomatoes of the year. They all have hard cores. Is there anything I can do?

A. Buy a different variety next year. Hard core in tomatoes is an inherited characteristic.

Q. My lettuce didn't form heads this year. Was I supposed to do something I didn't do?

A. Lettuce is a cool season crop. If planted too late, it tends to go to seed rather than form a head. Plant earlier next year.

Q. My terrarium is getting all moldy. What can I do?

A. Mold in a terrarium indicates it is too wet. Take off the cover or lid and let it dry out. If the mold is really severe, you may have to discard the plants and soil and start over.

Q. My sweet corn is pretty ratty looking—the ears are full of gaps where there aren't any kernels. Is this a disease?

A. The problem is poor pollination. Next year, to improve pollination, plant your corn in a block rather than in a few long rows.

Q. What trees can I plant over my septic tank drain field?

A. It's not a good idea to plant any trees over a septic tank drain field. Tree roots and septic tank systems are not a good combination. Plant shrubs or grass instead. If you must plant a tree, at least avoid willows, poplars and other water-loving, pipe-clogging trees.

Q. My neighbor says my black walnut tree is killing his vegetables. I think this sounds a little farfetched. Is it possible?

A. It depends on how far your tree is from his garden. Black walnut roots contain a toxin that will kill the roots of other plants they contact. Vegetables, shrubs and other plants within 60 feet of a large walnut tree may be damaged. Cutting the tree or moving the garden are the only solutions. Note that removing the tree would not provide an instant cure. It may take two years or more for the roots to rot after the tree is cut down.

Q. I mulched my vegetable garden this year to try to eliminate ground rot and some other problems. Now I have slugs instead. Is this unusual?

A. Not at all. The major aim of mulching is to conserve soil moisture to keep the soil beneath plants from drying out so quickly. Cool, damp, dark places are ideal for slugs. To get rid of the slugs, get rid of the mulch.

Q. My husband got a little carried away with spraying recently and sprayed my vegetable garden with the same pesticide he was using on our evergreens. Are the vegetables safe to eat?

A. Read the label on the original container. Crops listed on the label can be eaten if the spray was applied according to label recommendations for that crop. Crops not listed on the label should not be consumed. Next time, consult the label first and follow the directions on the crops that may be sprayed and the time that must elapse between last spray and harvest.

Q. I planted kidney beans for the first time this year. How do I know when they're ready for harvest?

A. Kidney beans, navy beans and soybeans should be left on the plant until the pods dry and begin to split open.

Q. My broccoli plants have bunches of tiny yellow flowers on them. Does that mean it's too late to harvest them?

A. Yes. The edible part of both broccoli and cauliflower is the immature flower buds. As you have found out, if you wait too long to harvest them, the flowers mature and open. Better luck next year.

Q. My potato plants are being bent to the ground by the weight of the round green things growing on them. What are they? Should I pick them off?

A. The round green things are the poisonous fruits of the potato plant. Ordinarily they pose no problem, but if there are so many that they are bending the plants over, you should probably remove them.

Q. I heard a story recently about using a gourd for a sponge. Is there really such a thing as a sponge gourd?

A. There is indeed such a thing. It's called the luffa gourd. With the outer covering and the pithy material that fills the spaces of the fibrous interior removed, the sponge gourd can be used like its seagoing namesake.

Q. I've really looked forward to those first tomatoes from my garden, but they're not fit to eat. The end where the flower used to be is all black and soft. What is it?

A. The problem is blossom end rot, a common problem with vigorously growing tomatoes that have suffered extremes in soil moisture. As plants get older and are growing less vigorously, blossom end rot becomes less of a problem. There's nothing you can do for the fruits that already have it—except remove them from the garden so they don't attract insect pests—but you may prevent further occurrences by watering the tomato plants thoroughly once a week during dry weather. Water until the soil is wet to a depth of at least six inches.

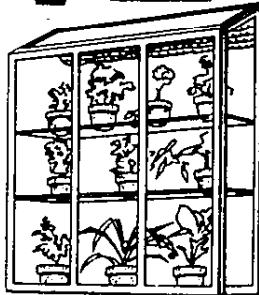
Overfertilizing encourages vigorous growth and predisposes plants toward blossom end rot. Overwatering can also cause it. Keeping the soil saturated kills

(Continued on page 37)

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