

From Under the Compost Pile

GARDENING NOTES FROM THE URBAN FARMER

Bringing in the Harvest!

RON BEREZAN

The work has been done. The seed was sown, the rain fell, the sun came out, and the plants grew tall (and so, of course, did the weeds!). All that remains is to enjoy the fruits of our labour and the multiple gifts of soil, sun and rain!

Consider harvesting leafy vegetables like (lettuces, kale, and swiss chard, etc.), and fruiting vegetables (tomatoes, squash, corn, etc.) in the early morning – that is when their taste and nutritional value are at their peak. During the hot afternoon, these plants conserve their nutrients by sending them below the surface into their roots. Logically then, harvest root crops like onions, carrots and potatoes in the high heat of the day to take advantage of this same process. Of course, most root crops can safely be left in the ground well into mid fall and early winter and harvested gradually when desired. There is nothing like pushing back the November snow to dig out a few carrots or onions for dinner!

If you have excess fruits or vegetables, be sure to consider giving some to your neighbours or taking some down to the local food bank. Sharing the harvest is a great way to build community and ensure that the abundance of this time of year is experienced by all.

On the other hand, you may wish to consider a variety of options for preserving some of your prized harvest inside the home for use over the long winter months. If you are able, you can create a closet like space in the corner of the basement that is insulated on the inside walls but exposed to the exterior walls. A temperature range of 2-8 degrees Celsius will keep apples, potatoes, carrots (best stored in a pail of sand), squash, and tomatoes for many weeks or months. Ideally a cold room will also have a fresh air source to minimize risk of molds and mildews developing.

Freezing is the most efficient way of preserving the nutritional quality of most produce. Some items like peas, beans, carrots, and corn require blanching (quickly scalding with boiling water) before freezing. Leafy greens like spinach and Swiss chard can be steamed and placed in meal-sized portions in freezer bags. Most berries freeze very well without blanching or steaming and make a great instant addition to those breakfast smoothies.

Drying is another great option for food preserving. Fruits, tomatoes and herbs are great candidates for this method. There are a number of excellent and affordable electric powered food-dehydrators on the market these days. Or, if you know your way around the garage, you can build yourself a solar dehydrator out of an old window, and old screen, a cardboard box and a little metal venting. Check out www.thefarm.org/charities/14at/surv/soldehyd.htm for the plans for this simple but effective solar dryer.

Finally, it may be time to dust off those old mason jars and can some cucumbers, tomatoes, plums, beans or almost anything else for the winter. Most of our parents and grandparents stored away huge quantities of garden food by this method. If you plan to undertake some canning, make sure that you have an experienced canner or an excellent canning manual to help you so that you do not risk botulism or other dangerous contamination. If you cruise the local garage sales, it is not difficult to find the canning equipment that you will need to get started.

While undertaking your harvesting and final gardening activities this season, why not take a little time to gather some seed for next year's crop. Seed saving is a very simple activity that has been practised for thousands of years and it brings the gardening cycle full circle – from seed to seed. It is easiest to begin with legume crops like peas or beans. Just let a few dry out on the vine, gather them and store them in a dry, dark container in a cool place for the coming year – it is as simple as that.

When gathering seed from tomatoes, take the guts out of a select tomato, seeds and all, and store it in a sealed yogurt or Tupperware container for a few days until it ferments. This will break down the protective coat on the seed. Then, separate out a few seeds from the pulp, dry them off and store them as described above. Whenever you are selecting any seeds for saving, chose them from the healthiest plants with the largest and best tasting fruits. This will ensure that you are preserving and even improving these traits for future crops.

May your harvest be rich and your tables be well laid!

Ron Berezan is a McCauley organic gardener who loves to create beautiful and edible landscapes. He runs a small gardening business called "The Urban Farmer" | www.theurbanfarmer.ca



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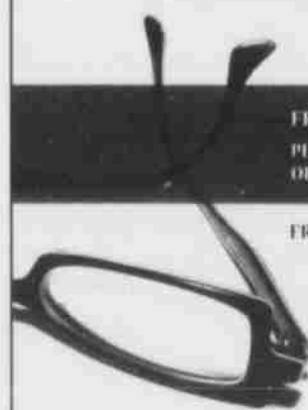
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