Gardening Newsletter

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Ripen Tomatoes, Pinch Brussels Sprouts, Winter Squash, Pest Questions

It is odd to be heading into September with everything looking so green due to the heavy rains in August. That caused some splitting of soft fruit, such as plums and figs, even some vegetables (one of my cabbages virtually exploded), but it also provided relief from summer watering restrictions. Tasks this month focus on getting the most out of the last weeks of the growing season: check that carrots and other root crops, hardy greens, etc. are well thinned so growth isn't slowed by crowding; boost the fall production of zucchini and other summer squash with a feeding of liquid fertilizer (e.g., fish fertilizer, compost or manure soaked in water), which also helps plants outgrow powdery mildew. Other tasks:

Tomatoes: Garden tomatoes (and peppers) have been slow to ripen with the cold weather last month and many people are feeling deprived of their favorite crop. Only fruit already set on outdoor plants now will have time to ripen (tomatoes in greenhouses have longer depending on the weather), so now is the time to prune or pinch off shoots with flowers and the smallest tomatoes. This allows plants to concentrate on developing existing fruit. If your plants have a lot of leaves and shoots, thin the foliage out so these last few weeks of sunlight and warmth reaches the fruit. Tomatoes can ripen off the vine once they have reached the chartreuse-green stage (a little yellower than the totally green stage) so once the weather cools, you can pick unripe tomatoes and ripen them indoors. To prolong the fresh tomato season, place the most perfect, unripe fruit 1 layer deep (not touching) in trays or boxes and store them somewhere cool and dark. Bring a few out periodically to ripen in a warm, bright place. Check the stored tomatoes frequently for signs of rot. Some people wrap them in newspaper before storing, but as long as the fruit isn't touching, leaving them unwrapped works fine to check the spread of rot and it is a lot easier to check for ripening or deterioration. Don't bother to hang up tomato plants to ripen fruit: there is no advantage to doing this as the pulled vines can't make any contribution to fruit development (and fruit plopping off the branches makes a mess).

Red fruit was as green as left-hand one when picked.

Brussels Sprouts: By the middle of this month, pinch or cut out the tips of Brussels sprouts plants to force development of the sprouts. If they were sown at the right time (end of May) you should be seeing pea-sized to dime-sized sprouts starting to develop where the stem of each leaf joins the main trunk. Pinching out the tops of the plants forces the plant to concentrate on sprout development and they grow fairly rapidly in size. By the end of October, the oldest sprouts lower on the trunk should be full sized. Younger sprouts continue to expand slowly over the winter. If plants are very small right now, however, and there is no sign of sprouts yet, it is doubtful there will be any (although plants are hardy enough to get through most winters, they make flowers instead of sprouts in the spring).

When to harvest winter squash? A common question, especially this year with so many cool days that slowed growth of squash. Winter squash has to mature completely on the vine before it is picked. This requires several months for the large fruited varieties, often taking well into fall. Once squash has reached the mature colour, whether it is dark green, orange, striped, etc., start checking the hardness of the stem. If it feels as hard as wood when you press a fingernail into it, the fruit is mature; if you can make a mark in the stem with your fingernail, the squash isn't ready yet (some gardening source suggest pressing your nail into the skin of the squash to test it, but don't do it! That will become the first rotten spot). Cure harvested squash in the warmest, driest place you have (indoors) for a few weeks, then store somewhere cool and dry.

This squash is still immature.

Pest notes: Some questions puzzling gardeners at this time of year:
Insect netting to protect carrot beds from carrot rust fly and cabbage/mustard family crops from cabbage root maggot need to stay in place until the end of October. There are 2-3 generations per summer of these pests. By fall there is a large population of adults laying eggs, which will hatch into maggots that continue to feed in the roots into the winter.

Large yellow underwing moths (*Noctua pronuba*) have been laying large batches of eggs for the last month on screens, wire mesh, bird netting, asparagus fronds, windows, dead twigs and other odd places. The eggs look like hundreds of tiny white or grey beads, laid in disorganized masses or along the strands of mesh or wire. Unlike other moth species that lay eggs on plants their caterpillars eat, LYUM moths lay eggs anywhere. When they hatch the caterpillars drop to whatever foliage is available as they can feed on a wide range of plants. Over the winter, these grow into those fat climbing cutworms that do so much damage to leaves of vegetables. Photo: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25

Fall webworm (*Hyphantria cunea*) caterpillars are noticeable this time of year spinning loose webs in deciduous trees, such as wild cherry, willow, alder. After tent caterpillar outbreaks people are more apt to notice this late summer web-spinning species. These are always around in low numbers, causing little or no damage; they never build up to the high populations tent caterpillars achieve in the outbreak years of their 'boom and bust' cycle so there is no need to worry about controlling fall webworm. Photo: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#32

Embellisia skin blotch is causing sooty blotches on the skin of garlic bulbs. It looks like someone handled the bulbs with coal dust on their fingers. The fungus usually stays on the skin and between the outer layers of the bulbs; it rarely makes lesions in the cloves within. This disease has been spreading on garlic since it was discovered in BC in 2011; it is worse in wet years and on bulbs stored in damp locations. A four-year crop rotation is essential to prevent infection from a variety of root pathogens in garlic, and it is helpful with this fungus too, but it won't entirely eliminate it as the spores are also spread on the wind. Clean the cloves you want to plant well enough to remove the blotched outer layers to avoid inoculating your soil with spores. Be sure to store garlic in very dry conditions (i.e., NOT in a garden shed or garage!). Photo: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/root.html#169b