

Danny L. Cain  
Walker County Extension Agent  
1501 North Airport Road  
Jasper AL 35504  
(205)221-3392

For Publication in *The Daily Mountain Eagle*

I remember spending many long hours as a kid working in our home garden regardless of how hot and dry it was or how tired we were. Mom always told me that above all else gardening should be fun. I didn't think so then but now I think she was right. Let's face it, most of us don't garden for all the money we trick ourselves into thinking that we save nor do we garden because we have no other food sources available to us. It surely isn't because gardening is such an easy activity that we can do without having to work at it. It is rather because all gardeners, regardless of how novice or experienced, share a love of working the soil and getting joy out of harvesting the produce we grow. In other words, we simply enjoy it.

If you haven't already started the annual summer garden, you are certainly not too late.

Here are a couple of tips that may make your gardening endeavors a little more successful. The most often overlooked aspect of gardening is locating a suitable site. I know most of us plant our gardens in the only location we have available, but if you have options there are several things to consider. Most importantly locate your garden where it will receive direct full sun. Almost all of our common summer garden selections require full sun in order to produce to their potential. The additional sunlight also helps to keep the foliage dry and cut back on disease problems later on. Your garden's soil must be well drained, and that is the bottom line. Locating a garden in a place where water stands for extended periods of time will inevitably lead to disaster. Many garden vegetables are prone to get root and stem rots under these conditions and many young tender transplants as well as seeds are vulnerable to a condition known as damping off as a result of excessive water.

Locate your garden as near as possible to a water source. This simple act will save you many tiring trips with a water bucket later on this summer when the dry weather arrives. It is also good to know your plants. Some will require more water than others and should be located closest to the water source while plants that require less water can be located farther away.

Pay close attention to rotating your vegetable crops. Plants that are in the same family usually suffer from the same insect and disease problems.

The quickest way to start disease problems is to plant the same crop in an area year after year. For example, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and potatoes are in the same botanical family and should not follow one another in the same area. Many fungal diseases are harbored in the soil and once started are very difficult if not impossible to control. Some of the diseases can lie dormant in the soil for as long as fifteen years! Also make use of proper planting patterns. Wind pollinated crops such as corn are better planted in several shorter rows as opposed to one or two long rows. Poor pollination resulting in “skippy” corn is a common problem when it is not planted properly.

There are three additional things that I think are important to getting your garden started off right. First of all is a soil test. This simple test will be the best \$8 that you will spend in your garden. Without a soil test there is absolutely no way to tell what the pH of your soil is and what nutrients are lacking. There are several rules of thumb that we go by, but the only way to know for sure is to have your soil tested regularly (every two to three years is what I recommend). Lime and fertilizer are expensive so it will save you money in the long run to know exactly what your garden needs.

I am also of the opinion that no garden can have too much organic matter. We could write volumes about all the benefits that organic matter has on your soil. Most of our soils are very low in organic matter and our hot, humid climate here in the South makes it very difficult to build up our soil’s organic matter content. Make regular applications of compost, leaf mold, or other organic matter to your garden. In the fall when leaves start falling, I usually pile the leaves right on top of our garden plot. The cover helps to hold moisture in the ground, prevents erosion, and you wouldn’t believe the earthworms that live under the leaf litter that helps aerate the soil over the fall and winter. It sure cuts out a lot of work. Then in the spring simply cut the leaf layer into the soil to add organic matter. Slowly over the course of time, you can build up your soil’s organic content. Winter cover crops such as crimson clover, vetches, and even barley are another excellent way to build up organic matter in the soil.

Once you are ready to plant make sure that you grow varieties that are adapted to grow here and make your selections based on disease resistance and ease of culture. You may try looking for varieties identified as “All America Selections”. These varieties have been tested and found to be excellent in a variety of selection criteria.

Finally, I can’t emphasize enough the use of mulch in your garden. Mulch around your plants will help hold water in the soil and will reduce the need for you to tote water or run your irrigation. Even as much as I hate

toting water, I hate pulling weeds and hoeing even worse. I can't think of anything that you can do in your home garden that will prevent weed problems like a good layer of mulch around your plants. I even apply mulch to the row middles because I hate to hoe and run the tiller. The mulch prevents sunlight from reaching the ground and thus prevents many weed seed from germinating. The mulch will also help to increase the quality of your vegetables and can reduce disease problems. Try a few inches of pine straw under some of your prize tomato plants and leave some on bare ground. The mulch will have the added benefit of reducing disease problems such as early blight in your tomatoes as well as reducing your chances of suffering nutrient deficiency problems such as blossom end rot. You will quickly become as firm a believer in mulch as I am. Many people also lay soaker hose along the row and stake it to the ground before they add mulch. This is as cheap and effective irrigation system as you can have in your garden. After you finish all of your harvest, don't forget to take up your soaker hoses for use next year or else you can reuse them in the fall garden.