

July Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

July is a month of opposites in the garden. Summer's heat is upon us, and we're harvesting crops; but Fall's cool weather is around the corner, and we should begin planning the cool-weather garden. Besides, it's comforting to look forward to some coolness by starting the seeds of those cool-season crops now.

Vegetables and Fruits

Transplant basil, celery, chard, cucumbers, dill, kale, leeks, summer-maturing lettuce, okra, green onions, melons, white potatoes, pumpkins, summer savory, New Zealand spinach, and summer and winter squash.



The peachy payoff.
Photo by Yvonne Savio,
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Do your transplanting in the late afternoon or evening so plants have the whole night to begin to recover before they're hit with a full day of sun and heat. Water the transplants in well and provide shade from the intense mid-day sun. Water enough to keep soil around transplants moist for at least a month until they're well-established. Mulch transplants to lessen evaporation so your irrigation water lasts longer.

At the end of the month, sow carrots, celery and cole crops--broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage (especially red and savoy types, which resist frost better), cauliflower, and kohlrabi. Keep the soil moist and shaded until they're up, and then gradually allow them more sun over a week's time.

Beans and carrots dislike transplanting and grow more successfully when they are sown where they will be harvested.

Corn planted this late in the season may develop problems with smut (the enlarged grey-black pods) when it's harvested in September. Destroy--don't compost--these infected ears carefully to prevent spreading the spores.

Get better germination during summer's heat by employing several techniques. Sow seeds thickly in flats or beds. Mulch the seeds thinly with sifted compost instead of heavy soil, which easily crusts over. Frequently sprinkle the flat or bed to keep it moist, or leave a mister on for several hours each day. Shield the bed with a piece of burlap or plywood--this will keep the seeds cooler than the air temperature, give them the moisture they need, and keep the soil surface from crusting. Remove the shade board or burlap after one-fourth of the seeds have germinated. Continue keeping the bed moist until most of the seedlings are up. If flats are used, place them in an area with less than full-day sun, and pay close attention to keeping them moist. Transplant the seedlings when the second set of true leaves develop. These are the ones that look like miniature versions of the mature plant.

To get excellent germination of carrots, parsley, and other slow-comers, sow seed on the north side of a furrow. Sprinkle, cover the seeds lightly with potting soil or fine compost, and shade with cheesecloth, window screening, or slats of wood. The slope away from direct sun and the shading will lessen the heat and baking effect of the sun and result in better germination. Sprinkle every second or third day to keep the soil surface moist. After most of the seeds are up, remove the screening. An easy way to handle the screening is to keep it in a roll--just roll it out over the bed for shade, and then roll it back up for storage when the seedlings are up.

Manure can be applied as a mulch directly onto globe artichokes, asparagus, cabbages and other cole crops, cucumbers, melons, sweet corn, and squash--but don't let it touch the stems or foliage, as it will burn them. Keep high-



Bolting onions provide seed for next year's crop. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

nitrogen fertilizers away from beans, beets, carrots, parsnips, sweet and white potatoes, and tomatoes, or there'll be more foliage than fruit.

Keep grape root zones evenly moist as the harvest approaches, to assure full filling out and ripening of the grapes. Enclose whole grape clusters in paper bags for protection from birds and wasps. Excluding light will not affect the ripening or sweetening of the grapes.

Water grapes and berries deeply once a week until harvest. Then, water once a month (twice a month during long periods of hot, dry weather).

Slip eight-inch sections of old pantyhose over grape clusters, tying the top and bottom with twist-ties or string in a bow. They keep out assorted insects and birds, but are easy to remove for harvesting and can be reused each year.

Tomatoes and other large plants in loamy clay soil use about one inch of water in three days of hot dry weather. Rinse the undersides of leaves with water to discourage spider mites. Tomatoes and eggplants especially like this refreshment.

Water and fertilize melons deeply once a week for juicy, fleshy fruits. Hold off irrigating melons about a week before they will ripen so their sugars will concentrate.

Protect vine crop fruits like melons and squash from snails and slugs by lifting the fruits or vegetables onto cans, berry baskets, or boards. Also, spread crushed eggshells under each plant--the snails and slugs will avoid the sharp particles. Metal cans speed ripening and sweetening of melons by concentrating the sun's warmth and transferring it to the melons.

Place ripening melons onto upside down aluminum pie pans or cans to keep them off the damp soil. The reflected heat and light will help them ripen evenly and sooner than when they are shaded by foliage.

Harvest beans, cucumbers, squash, and tomatoes at least every other day to encourage further production.

Pinch back herbs to encourage branching, and use the clippings either fresh or dry. Their flavor is at its peak just before they flower--harvest them early in the morning after the dew has dried but before the day becomes warm and the fragrant oils dissipate. If you can smell them, it's too late; wait till the next day.

Dry and store whole herb plants by using drawstring net bags from storebought apples, onions, and potatoes. Draw the string closed, and hang the bags on hooks. The netting allows air circulation but contains most dry crumbled pieces if the bag is bumped.

If onion and garlic foliage has not yet slumped and dried, stop irrigating, and bend the stalks to the ground. Allow a month or so for them to dry prior to harvest. Avoid bruising the bulbs during harvest, and let them cure in a single layer on slats or screens in a dry, well-ventilated place. They're ready to store when the foliage and outer layers are dry and papery. Store the bulbs in a cool, dry place where air can circulate. Any with soft, thick necks or bulbs that are not thoroughly dried should be used first, as they will spoil in storage. Check the stored batch once a week, and toss or use immediately any that begin to spoil.

Preserve peppers as soon as they're harvested. Quick-freeze them by slicing or dicing the whole peppers, spreading the pieces on a cookie sheet, and freezing them. Pack the frozen pieces into larger containers, and use the pieces as desired. They will lose their crispness when they've thawed, but they're fine for recipes to be cooked.

To dry chili peppers, pick them when they're deep red, and hang them in a sunny place until they're brittle. To dry other types of peppers, cut the larger ones in half or into pieces, or slit smaller-sized whole ones. Dry them until they're brittle. Store dried peppers in moisture- and vapor-proof containers in a cool, dry, dark place.

Freeze whole tomatoes for cooking later. After slight thawing, cut out the core, and squeeze from the blossom end. The pulp will emerge easily and can be used in any recipe.

Quick, thick tomato sauce can be achieved with little cooking. Puree whole, unpeeled tomatoes, and freeze the pulp in a narrow-topped container such as a plastic water jug. As it freezes, the clear liquid in the juice will separate and rise to the top of the container. When you're ready to make the sauce, remove the cap and turn the container upside down in a bowl to defrost. The clear liquid will melt before the pulp does, and the longer you allow the liquid to drain, the thicker the sauce remaining in the jug will get. Use this nutrient-rich clear liquid as a soup base.

Soak strawberry beds and fruit and nut trees every other week this month if the weather's especially hot.

Keep citrus and avocado trees well-watered through the summer. Build a basin for water to soak in deeply, but start it one foot away from the trunk to prevent crown rot.

Paint tree trunks with another coat of light-colored interior latex paint to prevent sunscald, especially on young trees. Prune tree branches with no new growth, and prune espaliered fruit trees only to shape them gently.

Prop up fruit-laden tree branches so that the weight doesn't break the branches. Contour stake tops to reduce damage from rubbing during breezes. An old rake makes a perfect support--tuck the branch between the tines (cushion it with layers of cheesecloth or an old glove), and angle the handle into the soil so the branch can still sway in the breeze. Destroy fallen fruit so it won't spoil and attract insects and diseases.

Make a "sandwich" rack for drying fruit outdoors. Place a second rack on top of the fruit, and flip the "sandwich" each time the fruit needs to be turned. Use a single or double layer of cheesecloth to separate the fruit from the rack.

If your peaches and apricots have brown spots and either rot or shrivel up, they may have brown rot fungus, especially if twigs also develop depressed, reddish-brown, shield-shaped cankers. Remove and destroy--don't compost--all infected fruit and twigs. Lessen the severity of the problem on next year's fruit by cleaning up fallen and rotting fruit, as well as any "mummies" that shrivel but remain on the trees. When the trees bloom next spring, dust or spray the blossoms with sulfur two to four times from the time that the buds show pink until the petals fall.

Ornamentals

Sow or transplant alyssum, celosia (cockscomb), cosmos, forget-me-nots, gazania, marigolds, nasturtiums, portulaca (moss and sun rose), salvias, statice (sea lavender), verbena, and zinnias. Keep garden soil moist and mulched until they're established.

Also transplant fibrous begonia, calendula (pot and winter marigold), chrysanthemums, crape myrtles, dahlias, daylilies, delphiniums, dianthus (pinks, sweet William), foxgloves, hibiscus, hydrangeas, impatiens, penstemons, petunias, rudbeckias (coneflowers, black-eyed-susan), and salvias. Keep them shaded during the hottest portion of the day, and sprinkle the foliage several times a day for the first week after they're transplanted. Then, gradually increase their time in the direct sun over a week's time, when they should be able to withstand a full day's sun without drooping.

Fill in garden gaps with summer-into-fall bloomers, especially alyssum, celosia, cosmos, petunia, portulaca, red sage, vinca, and zinnia.

Encourage repeat blooming by pinching or cutting back alyssum, coreopsis, crape myrtles, dahlias, delphiniums, dianthus, fuchsias, gaillardias, lobelia, marigolds, penstemons, petunias, rose of Sharon, salvias, and verbenas. Prune chrysanthemums and poinsettias for the last time to encourage them to bush



Black-Eyed-Susan loves the heat. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

out and keep the stems from becoming scraggly by autumn--unless you prefer a droopy or curly-stemmed display.

Continue pruning spent blooms on roses weekly or so until fall, down to the first five-part leaf or a bit further to gently shape the plant. Then, feed lightly, and water. Maintaining this schedule will encourage continuous bloom throughout the season. Water only in the mornings to lessen mildew and other disease problems.

Dig and store spring-blooming bulbs and tubers when their foliage is completely dry. Gently remove excess soil (but don't wash the tubers), and store them in a cool, dry, dark place.

Dig and divide bearded iris clumps if they're crowding each other or didn't bloom too much last spring. Break off and discard the older central rhizomes that have no foliage. Let the young, healthy rhizomes dry out of the direct sun for several hours so a callous forms over the break before replanting it. On rhizomes with foliage, clip roots to two inches in length, remove individual dry leaves, and clip the rest to about an eight-inch fan. Dig compost and bonemeal into the top six inches of soil. Replant the rhizomes a foot apart but deep enough only to barely cover the rhizome with soil. Water them in.

Root cuttings of azaleas, fibrous begonias, camellias, carnations, marguerite daisies, fuchsias, gardenias, geraniums, hollies, hydrangeas, lilacs, marguerites, mock oranges, mums, and verbena in a mix of milled peat, sand, and garden soil. Provide filtered light, and maintain the moisture of the soil mix until they are well-rooted, in a month or so. Then transplant them.

You can have fuchsias in bloom for Christmas if you choose the right varieties and take cuttings by early next month. Any fuchsia that does not need long days to set buds is suitable--including 'Angel's Flight,' 'California,' 'Dollar Princess,' 'Elfriede Ott,' 'Gartenmeister Bonstedt,' 'Golden Anniversary,' 'Hula Girl,' 'Kathy Louise,' 'Koralle,' 'Leverkusen,' 'Red Jacket,' 'Stella Ann' and 'Trumpeter.' Root three- to four-inch terminal cuttings in a loose mix, transplant them into six-inch pots, and pinch them every few weeks through October to encourage branching. Grow them in a bright window or under fluorescent lamps three to six inches above the plants for 12 to 16 hours a day until budset. Plants will bloom for months. Then, cut them back and feed them for rebloom next summer.

Tear--don't just trim--rose suckers off at the base with a harsh downward and outward pull. Don't be gentle--the suckers will not return only if you remove or damage the sucker bud at the base.

Continue to mow lawns at two or three inches height to keep grass roots shaded. Grass that is shorn too much when mown is susceptible to shock and sunburn. Also, keep your lawn mower blades sharp. Dull blades may require as much as three times the power as sharp blades to do the job, and they tear the grass blade edges, making the lawn more susceptible to stress and diseases.

General

Heavily mulch cultivated areas and pathways with organic matter to cut down on weeds and watering, and to help keep plant roots cool. Replenish it as it deteriorates into the soil. Keep it from touching stems of plants and trunks of trees to allow good air circulation and avoid possible crown rot.

Continue watering and feeding the entire garden with a balanced fertilizer and manure tea or fish emulsion every other week or so for steady growth and food production. Foliar sprays of liquid seaweed help trees, vegetables, fruits, and ornamentals withstand heat stress. Pay special attention to shallow-rooted plants, which wilt and dry out quickly in hot, dry weather. Remember to not overhead water late in the day during warm weather, when leaves can't dry off by sunset, as this encourages diseases.

Keep the compost pile moist and turned. It works fast in hot weather. If it's in direct sun, keep its moisture from evaporating too quickly by covering the pile lightly with a tarp.

Encourage birds into your garden to eat the harmful insects by providing whole sunflower seedheads. Hang the entire head in a clothes hanger on a tree limb, fence, or post, letting the birds pick their own. Save the sunflower stalks, stripped of their branches and leaves, to use next year as trellis stakes.

Do you have a plastic container that is permeated with the smell of onion or garlic? Wash the container thoroughly with soap, and air dry it. Crumple a piece of paper towel in it, and tightly close the cover. The odor will disappear in a few days. Discard the paper. Wash the container again with soap. Repeat if necessary.