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In My Garden - February 2010

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

As we start to notice the days getting longer we think more about planting the vegetable garden for this summer. The tomato is the most popular planted vegetable in home gardens across the United States, and people often want to get a jump start on them.

Whether you plan to grow your tomatoes from seed or transplants, try to reflect on last year's crop and ask yourself some simple questions. Were there any problems in the tomatoes last year? Some problems we can solve, but others, such as the temperature at bloom time, we just have to live with. There are few tomato diseases that we can try to avoid.

When you shop for tomato plants, look at the initials on the label. Tomatoes are bred to resist certain diseases and the letters stand for resistance: V-Verticillium wilt, F- Fusarium wilt, N-Nematodes, T-Tobacco Mosaic, A-Alternaria stem canker, TSWV-Tomato spotted wilt virus. The more letters, the better.

Last year I had problems with verticillium wilt. This disease shows up when the plant is starting to load up with fruit. Symptoms include yellowing of lower leaves and eventually dying shoots.

So I ordered tomato seeds that have a V and N on their label. This tells me that they are bred to be resistant to Verticillium wilt and rootknot nematode. You would know if you had a nematode problem. Nematodes live in the soil, especially sandy soil, and they attach to roots for some free food. So when you pull up the plants in the fall, the roots are all deformed and knobby with nematodes. As I put more and more organic matter into the garden each year it seems that the stunting and loss of productivity is less severe.

If you grow cucumbers, you can buy seeds that are resistant to powdery mildew and downy mildew.

My tomato seed order just arrived. I'll stagger their planting so the harvest is spread out. I plant the earliest ones first for the earliest crop that I can get.

In my yard I have one more grapevine to prune and a crape myrtle to finish pruning. I noticed that all my hellebores (Lenten roses) were in good bloom by mid-January and I am amazed how well they held up in the rain. My bulbs are starting to pop with color. I have 3 different types of narcissus and 5 colors of crocus that bloom in my lawn pretty much in succession. We continue to harvest citrus and avocados and enjoy having fresh oranges, grapefruit and tangerines each day.

I still need to put dormant oil on my roses, but before I do I always carefully check the canes for preying mantids eggs. Look for the little ridged mass. They can be hard to spot if they are on old canes that are gray or white. Spraying them with dormant oil will smother them, so I try to gather them up and put them where they can hatch and have food, usually in the groundcover or bushes. Mantids eat lots of bad bugs once they have hatched.

While you are examining your pruned roses, check for buds growing toward the inside of the bush. They will be very short and can be rubbed off fairly easily. This will help keep the vase shape of the bush.

One thing I need to do is divide my water lilies. I have them growing in clay filled pots set in the bottom of half barrels. Their roots have grown out of the pots and have taken up at least half the barrel. This does not leave room for the fish to go deep enough in hot weather. When I transplant the lilies I cut the roots off at the sides of the pot and remove the plants. You can cut the thick stem anywhere you want. They root easily and you have more plants.

You can buy potting mix for water lilies but it tends to be too light and floats away when submerged. That's why I use clay. But you could also place small rocks on the surface of the potting soil before resetting the pots in the barrel. I drop any extra cuttings into a 5 gallon bucket of water and find homes for them with friends.

Remember it is getting to the end of bare root season. Time to go get those plants and put them in the ground before they dry out.

If you have houseplants later in the month is a good time to fertilize them with a 50% fertilizer solution. When they start to grow they need some food to keep them strong.

As I sit here it is a balmy spring-like day outside and I am itching to get off this computer and start digging in the dirt. If you also feel this way, then you must be a real gardener too! So get digging!

February 4, 2010