

Jump Start Your Garden

By Michele Rugo, a *Murphys resident and* University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Calaveras County

Sometimes when I come racing out my back door, my head crammed with things needing doing immediately if not sooner, my feet come to an abrupt halt. Often the feeling is so strong it is as if someone has blocked my way to remind me to slow down.

In those moments I take it as a hint given by nature itself: the poppies nodding in the summer pasture, the wild grape pushing through the gravel of a garden path, the cheerful baby blue-eyes crowding the roadside, all say to let those things that will still need doing later wait.

For now, to just observe the swelling buds of the lilac, the nubs of red and green sedum emerging from last year's dieback, even the slow crawl of a millipede is more than enough.

For home gardeners, one of life's great pleasures must also be the arrival of spring plant and seed catalogs in the mailbox.

Within their beckoning covers are descriptions and photos of tried and true favorites as well as - at least to a gardener - thrilling new varieties of all manner of flowers, fruits and vegetables.

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of planning and planting your spring garden. What is difficult but necessary is to recognize the particulars of your own garden environment and to plan and plant accordingly.

For most of us, that means choosing plants that will thrive in a Mediterranean climate and paying close attention to water, temperature, soil, and sun and shade requirements.

I killed many a plant in my early years in the Mother Lode by thinking I could recreate the New England gardens of my youth here in the foothills.

Don't be afraid to ask for help in choosing plants from local nursery staff, Master Gardeners or even friends and neighbors whose gardens you admire.

People who garden usually enjoy sharing their knowledge, and if they're honest, most have a cautionary tale or two to tell about their own spectacular failures.

To garden is to continually learn.

March is the "start up" month in the garden.

Lawns start greening, fruit tree buds begin to swell, over-wintered vegetables protected from the cold begin putting out new growth.

It's also time to start seeds in a greenhouse or under a cold frame.

Some may argue that the main reason for starting seeds is to save money, but when you add the cost of supplies, soil, seeds and heat for a backyard gardener, the saving factor is pretty minimal.

Whether you try seed starting or opt for nursery plants, I would counter that at least with vegetables, the real value in planting a home garden is in knowing how the produce was raised while potentially limiting you and your family's exposure to pesticides and unhealthy bacteria.

Given the current drought and that large farm operations in California will see their water usage dramatically limited this year, it follows that we may also see less of a

choice of fruits and vegetables in the stores.

The home garden offers the opportunity to raise disease resistant, heirloom and other hard to find varieties.

One recent specialty seed catalog that came across my desk listed over 200 varieties of beans alone.

Many county schools already have gardens in place to teach students about science, nutrition and their own relationship to the planet; having a home garden brings this education full circle and can be a wonderful shared family activity beyond the obvious benefit of helping to put healthy food on the table.

And come summer, is there anything tastier or more satisfying than a supper of Caprese salad made from your own homegrown basil and tomatoes?

Five Key Elements in Starting Healthy Seeds

Disease-free seed – Quality seed produces quality plants.

Choose carefully from certified, reputable companies.

Consider searching out local organic growers who know what varieties do best in our area.

Soil – You will need sterile, disease free potting soil with good drainage.

“Soil-less mix” is best and contains no garden soil that can contain root rot diseases.

Most commercial mixes are a combination of peat moss, perlite and a starter fertilizer or mycorrhizal fungi, which promotes root development and disease resistance.

Container – You will need a sterile container with good drainage.

Nursery flats designed for seedlings are recommended.

Seeds started in individual or other pots are vulnerable to disease but placing them in a “domed flat” helps retain humidity, keeps the heat in and speeds up germination.

Thoroughly washed containers that are used to sell precooked chickens make excellent dome planters.

Bottom Heat – The seed begins to germinate when the soil warms.

Add a small amount of water to the warming soil mix and the plant “thinks” that spring has arrived.

Most seeds will sprout at a constant 70 degrees while peppers prefer a temperature closer to 80.

Seeds can also be started indoors on top of a water heater and moved to the outside greenhouse or placed under artificial light when the seedlings first emerge.

Light – Seedlings require good quality light to photosynthesize and grow.

Closely placed indoor grow lights give a good start without the seedlings becoming lanky although real sun in an outdoor greenhouse is best.

Indoors, a window with a southern exposure is also a good choice, but be careful that seedlings do not become lanky and soft.

PS – When planning your spring garden be sure to make room for a few annual or perennial herbs and flowers to keep bees and other pollinators supplied with needed food.

If gardening space is limited, planting in containers on porch steps and along walkways will double duty as décor.

Plant these to help save bees: Herbs: Borage, Catmint, Cilantro, Fennel, Lavender, Rosemary, Sage and Thyme; Perennials: Anemone, Aster, Buttercup, Geranium,

Hollyhocks and Snowdrops; Annuals: Calendula, Cleome, Heliotrope, Poppy, Sunflower, Sweet alyssum and Zinnia.

. For more information or help with foothills gardening, call 754-2880, email mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us or visit ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners