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Living the Good Life - Brian Crumblebulme

Good Life in the Garden

The serious gardener is always optimistic and always busy, and summer is surely that quintessential time when everything demands attention at once. Not only are we enjoying the summer season for itself, July and August are the months to sow and prepare for fall, winter and next spring. This is also the time to assess your endeavours and take notes to avoid the same mistakes next spring. Easy to say; living in the banana belt, every year on the first sunny days I'm out there planting too early and too close together.

If you are not familiar with winter gardening in the northwest, a good guide is to consider cultivars developed from indigenous species or from those grown in similar climates. Thus, most of the brassicas, endives, and alliums will be in this list. In pots, boxes or out of the way beds, basic winter vegetables must be sown now if you have not already done so. These can include, endive, celery, leeks, broccoli, cabbage, kale, Florence fennel, beets, chard, and later in the month, onions. Late sowings of snow peas, pod peas, and bush beans can also be done for fall harvesting until frost. A good place would be on ground recently cleared of early potatoes.

Besides berries, the strawberry patch is also producing runners (stolons) with small plants attached. If you peg these down with a small rock over a 4-inch pot of high quality potting soil they will make strong plants for next year (the best ones are closest to the parent plant) or, later in the fall, they can be brought into the greenhouse or window sill to fruit around Christmas time. Speaking of which, winter-flowering houseplants such as primulas and cinerarias may be sown now along with a few cuttings of last year's straggly poinsettias and begonias for a touch of mid-winter colour.

Fully loaded fruit trees may need assistance at this time to optimise the crop. Heavy branches might require propping up to avoid breaking and to keep them out of reach of deer. Last year a few roving families of deer pulled some branches down from my trees until I tied little bags of moth balls on all the lower branches; it worked. If quality fruit is desired, many traditional growers will remove the smallest fruits now to allow the larger ones to more fully develop. This is especially important for grapes for which you can invest in a specially designed pair of scissors.

A good mulch of grass clippings or hay around the trees will also reduce water loss and fruit drop if it gets too dry. Young trees must be assisted during hot dry spells by thorough watering once a week to encourage the development of a deep root system, which will be less vulnerable to summer drying.

Soil Tips

As well as lack of summer rains, many Islands gardens have shallow topsoil; this is why it is so important to build up a rich layer of colloidal humus, created by adding compost and manure, which will retain water instead of allowing it to evaporate or trickle through. Indistinguishable to the eye, colloids occupy a transition zone between microscopic and molecular and possess the ability to absorb ionically charged water. It is this mineral rich water layer that is the medium for plant growth, being in essence, a rich soupy mixture of plant food. Chemical fertilizers by-pass this colloidal process by carrying the essential minerals in solution, a solution that is easily washed away by rain. The dark colloidal humus, by contrast, retains both the water and the minerals for a long period thereby creating a self-sustaining ecology within the soil even during periods of drought.

Harvesting

If you are harvesting onions, garlic and shallots, they must be dry before storage or they will quickly rot. They can of course be left on the ground but if the bed is needed for fall and winter salads, the bulbs can simply be placed on slats in a well ventilated bench in the shed. Try not to let asparagus and rhubarb get too dry or they will go into early dormancy. They should definitely not be picked after July 1 but encouraged to develop strong roots for next year by top dressing with manure or good compost.

Some herbs such as oregano develop more flavour when dried and July is a good month to start. I use oregano for many dishes so I am pleased it has naturalised in my orchard and at the first sign of colour in the flower buds is when we pick them and hang them to dry in a well ventilated room, shaded from the sun. After two or three days, the leaves are ready to be rubbed off and saved in a jar. Many of the mints and fennel can also be dried this way, though they will take a little longer. It is

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not worth drying chives or chervil as they lose all flavour, instead you can freeze them in melted butter for winter potatoes, or flavour vinegar with the flowers. Herb flowers are exquisite for flavouring vinegars. Try thyme, sage, chives or tarragon in white wine vinegar; the flowers will bleach in the acetic acid but the vinegar will develop a lovely colour. Too early yet for basil.

Kiwi vines are growing rampant across fences and pergolas now, and they will benefit from a summer pruning of the long lateral shoots. Try cutting them back to three or four leaves to develop into fruiting spurs for next year.

I believe that food should be good, taste good, and look good and one of the simplest ways to achieve this from the home garden is by an abundance of fresh herbs and flowers. Herbs and flowers should be chosen for flavour, fragrance, and colour to support and accompany your regular fruit, meat and vegetables. They are not—repeat not—a garnish to be pushed to the side of the plate like a decoration. In our house every meal is designed to optimise taste and appearance and at this season, that means a bowlful of fresh herbs and flowers. For fresh fish such as cod, try red or pink rose petals. You can also make a great sauce from roses, fennel and a little cream. Serve fuchsias or chopped nasturtium flowers with red meat, and fresh green nasturtium seeds in the meat sauce.

Recipes From July's Garden

Nasturtium Rolls

Prep time 10 minutes, Chill time 3 hours or overnight, Serves 4

- 300 grams fresh island goat cream cheese
- 1 small bunch of chives
- a sprig of peppermint
- a large sprig of basil
- rind of one grated orange
- 1 tablespoon wildflower honey
- 8-12 large nasturtium leaves
- as many nasturtium flowers

Combine all the ingredients except the nasturtiums and mash together. If you use a food processor add the herbs first and chop with short bursts, then add the cheese and honey. Place the mixture in a bowl and chill until firm. Carefully wash the leaves and pat dry. Divide the mix into finger-sized portions and roll a leaf around each. Secure with a toothpick. Garnish with nasturtium flowers and serve with a good fruit wine on a hot afternoon.

Fish Roses

Prep time 20 minutes, Cooking time about 30 minutes, preheat oven 425°F-220°C, Serves 4

- 350 grams sole or sand dab fillets
- 350 grams spring salmon fillets
- 1 cup fish stock
- cup dry white wine
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 tablespoons flour
- juice of 1 lime
- salt & pepper to taste
- 1 bowl of fresh clean rose petals
- few rose petals and mint leaves for garnish

Rinse the fillets and cut them into small strips not more than 2 inches wide. Roll up each fillet tightly and arrange them in a baking dish. These are your fish roses. Combine all the remaining ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Stirring gently, heat the mixture in a saucepan then pour it over the fish roses. Bake for 20-25 minutes, garnish and serve immediately.

Goes well with pasta, snow peas and fresh bread. 🍴