



Sometimes, it's good to let your garden go to pot

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John Hogan | The Grand Rapids Press
By

Summer officially begins this week, though we got a taste of it with three days of 90-plus degree readings in early June.

Think it's safe to plant now, or do you believe the window of opportunity has slammed shut?

It's wide open, of course, especially for container-grown gardens featuring heat-loving vegetables and tropical plants.

Interest in container gardening has surged as growers provide scaled-down versions of land-grabbers such as tomato and cucumbers. The timing is ideal in another sense — retailers are slashing prices on potted plants to clear inventory before we're beyond optimum planting times.

The Proven Winners line of annuals offers some of the best selections of compact color suited for containers, notably the 31 Supertunia hybrid petunias and 10 Superbena hybrid verbenas varieties on the market.

For vegetables, Bonnie Plants is a front-runner. The family-run Alabama company is the largest producer of vegetables and herbs in North America.

Bonnie Plants has 75 growing locations in the U.S., said Stan Cope, who runs the company started by his grandparents, Livingston and Bonnie Paulk, in 1918.

While Cope may be biased, he and legions of time-strapped gardeners like the idea of buying



Courtesy Photo

Transplanted veggies, lettuce and tomatoes, bask in the sun. Stan Cope, who runs Bonnie Plants -- the largest producer of vegetables and herbs in North America -- recommends at least six hours of sunlight for vegetables.



transplants rather than starting from seed.

A head start

"Transplants will buy you lots of time because plants are six weeks or older when you put them in the pot, and you'll be harvesting much sooner," Cope said.

Bonnie and other growers offer compact vegetables and herbs bred specifically for containers.

Many garden staples, notably tomato, eggplant and pepper, perform well in containers, especially the downsized hybrids, Penn State University researchers said.

Plants mentioned specifically for outstanding growth and flavor include Bush Early Girl tomato, Better Bush tomato, Hansel and Gretel eggplant, Burpless Bush cucumber and Baby Bush squash.

As a general rule, larger containers yield better results.

Pots with a 20-inch diameter are best for tomatoes and cucumbers. Eggplant and peppers can make it in pots with a diameter of at least 14 inches.

There is a lot of flexibility in terms of the container you use, Cope said.

"Almost anything can serve as a container — flower pots, pails, buckets, wire baskets, bushel baskets, washtubs, window planters, even large food cans," Cope said. "When in doubt, bigger is always better. Plants look better and last longer because the roots will have more room to grow."

No matter what container you use, make sure it has drainage holes, he said.

Don't skimp on the soil. Cheaper grades of potting soil may save money, but dry quicker and are prone to compaction. Select a product containing peat, vermiculite, aged compost, perlite and perhaps moisture-holding crystals

Schultz Co. and Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. make potting mixes designed for containers.

"Don't skimp here," Cope said. "A quality mix holds moisture but drains well, giving roots the perfect balance of air, moisture and stability. Quality potting mix stays fluffy all season long."

Fill the container so there is at least one inch of space between the soil and the rim of the pot. You want water to accumulate inside the container and not run over the edge, creating a mini-mudslide in the process.

Nurture nature

Like active kids on summer break, plants are heavy feeders. Even if potting soil comes with fertilizer already mixed in, you may need to feed, Cope said.

Fertilizer runs out sooner in hot weather with frequent watering. He suggests using timed-release granules or water soluble fertilizer.

Organic fertilizers are ideal because they feed plants and enrich the soil with beneficial organisms.

Vegetables and many annuals require full sun to thrive, with the exception of impatiens and begonias.

Cope recommends at least six hours of sunlight for vegetables.

"The sun drives energy for production and for making sugars, acids and other compounds responsible for the fullest flavor," he said. "Make sure pots on a deck or porch get enough sunlight and move them to a sunny spot if shade encroaches."

Full sun can be torture — even lethal — for container-grown plants ignored for days on end. Hanging baskets and containers may require watering twice a day, especially when temperatures soar.

"Vegetables are at least 90 percent water," Cope said. "To produce well, they may need daily watering in hot weather."

He recommends a drip irrigation system on a timer.

"It's a little more work on the front end," he said, "but it makes for as close to auto-pilot watering as you can get."

Wouldn't a drip irrigation system make an ideal Father's Day gift — especially if Dad isn't the one stuck with the job?

Food for thought!

E-mail the author of this story: yourlife@grpress.com

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