June Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

Garden growth shifts into high gear this month, with hot air temperatures and warm soil. El Nino has finally quieted down, but La Nina seems to have taken over, so who knows where our "real" Southern California summer is? Plants are settled in and well on their way toward strong growth, many blooms, and delicious harvests.

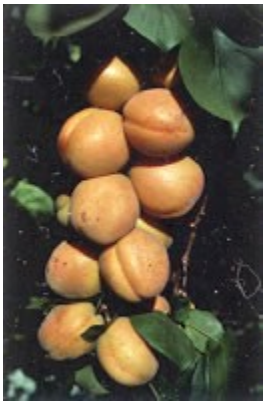
Vegetables and Fruits

Sow or transplant lima and snap beans, beets, carrots, celeriac, celery, chard, corn, cucumbers, egg-plants, oakleaf and other heat-tolerant and bolt-resistant lettuces, melons, okra, peppers, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, radishes, New Zealand spinach, summer and winter squash, and tomatoes.

Plant the last batch of corn this month, as later plantings will probably have smut problems (those big, grey and black puffs of fungus in place of kernels) when harvested in September. Or, you may choose to innoculate your corn with the fungus-it's a delicacy in Southwest and Mexican cuisine.

Lavender, marjoram, rose-mary, sage, savory, and thyme do fine in hot sun and poor but well-drained soil with minimal fertilizer. On the other hand, basil, chives, coriander (cilantro), and parsley prefer richer soil with more frequent watering.

Choose transplants that aren't rootbound. Confined roots can't spread out fast enough, now that the weather's already hot, to absorb enough moisture and nutrients to survive summer heat--so they wilt frequently or die.



This plentiful fruitset of apricots should have been thinned to allow full development of individual fruits and reduce diseases due to overcrowding. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Gently loosen the rootballs of transplants before planting them so roots can quickly reach out into surrounding soil to establish themselves.

Transplant seedlings close enough so that the leaves of mature plants will shade the soil between the plants. This will keep plant roots cooler, and the sun doesn't bake the soil. There's less evaporation, so you'll have to water less.

When replanting replanting areas where you've just grown vegetables, follow heavy-feeding leafy vegetables like spinach and cabbage with nitro-gen-replenishing legumes such as peas, beans, and soybeans; or plant a less-demanding root crop. Don't fertilize the soil again before succession plantings of beans or carrots, since excess nitrogen results in forked and hairy carrots and lush bean plants with few beans. Do add some compost before setting out spinach, kale, and lettuce, since you do want lush foliage in these crops.

Fill small planting area gaps with heat-tolerant lettuce or spinach. Keep seed packets of these in the refrigerator for seeds that will germinate quickly in hot weather.

Some vegetables are more efficient than others, producing more food for the amount of garden space they use and the time they require from you. Carrots, cucumbers, onions, potatoes, summer squash, and tomatoes produce the most. Yields of cucumbers, squashes, and tomatoes can be even greater when they are grown on trellises, saving soil space for growing more crops.

The most time-consuming activity in a small garden is harvesting--it requires twice as much time as weeding. But then, harvesting is so much more enjoyable than weeding!

For greater yields, feed eggplants, peppers, squashes, and tomatoes when they blossom. Assure a plentiful set of peppers and tomatoes by increasing the magnesium available to the plants: dissolve one tablespoon of Epsom salts in one quart of warm water, and spray or sprinkle the solution on the leaves and blossoms. Pour the remainder in a ring around the plant at the dripline. Repeat this several times during the blossoming period.

If your first squash blossoms don't set fruit, don't worry. They're probably just male blossoms. Once the female blossoms (the ones with the miniature squash at the base of the flower) start appearing along with the male flowers--and bees are present to pollinate them--fruit set should take place.

Hand-pollinate tomatoes by flicking each bloom during the driest part of the day. Big plants can be taken care of with one or two shakes while holding onto their cages or stakes. The pollen is naturally sticky, and this helps spread it.

Keep melon plants growing strongly throughout the season for best quality fruit. Almost half of a melon's final sugar content develops during the last week of maturation, so stop irrigating then to concentrate the sugars. Optimum plant spacing for maximum sweetness is six square feet per plant.

Harvest celery by the cut-and-come-again method instead of pulling up the entire plant. Pull off individual stalks as you need them, or cut the plant off about three inches above the soil level. This will leave enough of the central growing point to send up more stalks.

Manure can be applied as mulch directly onto globe artichokes, asparagus, cabbages and other cole crops, corn, cucumbers, melons, and squashes. But keep it away from beans, beets, carrots, lettuces, peas, sweet and white potatoes, and tomatoes--or it will encourage too much foliage at the expense of the edible parts we want.

Keep vegetables picked often, even if you don't plan to use that day's harvest immediately. Vegetables that aren't harvested soon enough will produce a chemical that inhibits further blossoming. Check plants at least every other day during the summer. This is especially true for beans, cucumbers, eggplants, squashes, and tomatoes.

The rich tomatoey flavor and aroma in raw tomatoes is the greatest when the tomatoes are left at room temperature and eaten just after being cut. Refrigeration kills the fragrance.

If you must store tomatoes in the refrigerator for several days before using them, harvest them early in the day, when they are still cool from overnight and are less sensitive to chilling injury--that disappointing flavorless mushiness.

Pinch back herbs--especially fast-growing basil--to encourage bushy, more delicate-flavored growth through the summer.

Stop watering your garlic and bulb onions when the foliage begins to dry naturally. Bend the foliage to the ground to encourage the bulbs to form the dry outer layers that are necessary for long storage. Avoid bruising the bulbs during harvest, and cure them in single layers on slats or screens in a dry, shady, well-ventilated place. Make sure the necks of the bulbs are completely dry (crisp and papery) before clipping the foliage or bunching and tying the bulbs.

Today's eggplant comes in more than large, deep-purple globes! Photo by Yvonne Savio,

Thick-necked onion varieties are more vulnerable to infection because they dry more slowly and less completely than thin-necked ones, so eat these first. Store the thoroughly dried onions in a shaded, cool, dry, well-ventilated area. Check them periodically, and eat any that show signs of spoilage.

Stop watering rhubarb to encourage it to go dormant during summer heat.

Removing suckers that form at the base of cornstalks will not increase (and may even decrease) yields. The extra leaf surface of the suckers increases photosynthesis, which provides more food for the developing ears. However, remove any ears that form on the suckers, as these will take energy away from the main, full-sized ears.

Lessen earworm damage on corn by sprinkling lime or Bacillus thuringiensis (sold as Bt, Dipel, and Thuricide) onto the silks as soon as they begin to dry. Using mineral oil may spoil the corn. Insect- and disease-damaged ears should be carefully des-troyed rather than composted or used for mulch, since you don't want to spread the nasties throughout your garden. This is especially true for smut-infested ears.

Shape gourds by wrapping tape around them three or four times where you want the narrow portion to be.

Protect vine vegetables from snails and slugs by lifting the fruits up onto cans, berry baskets, or boards. Also, spread crushed eggshells under each plant--the snails and slugs will avoid the sharp particles.

Thin fruits on trees and vines to what you realistically expect to consume. Thin grape clusters to produce bunches of fewer but larger individual fruits, rather than many tiny ones. Thin tree fruits to opposite sides of branches for balanced and more complete development with less strain on trees, especially on those bearing fruit for the first or second time. Leave at least three inches between apricots and plums; and five inches between peaches, nectarines, pears, and apples.

Put netting on trees two or three weeks before the fruit begins to ripen to discourage birds from making a habit of visiting the tree. (You know they decide the fruit's ripe the very day before you do, so they get them first!) Tie loose ends of the netting so birds don't get trapped inside.

Paint tree trunks with a light-colored indoor latex paint to prevent sunburn damage, which then invites borers and fungus infections. Use an inexpensive brand, or thin down a more expensive one to a solution of half water and half paint.

Finish trimming citrus trees. Fruit is produced on new wood, so remove entire branches (thinning) rather than shortening them (heading back). To redirect branches, trim them to a leaf pointing in the direction you want new growth to go.

Keep citrus and avocados well-watered--deeply every two or three weeks--and a three-inch-thick layer of mulch to maintain uniformly cool temperatures. They are more tender than other fruit trees and cannot withstand the stress of alternate moisture and dryness. Citrus roots grow beyond the tree's dripline, so give it a larger basin area.

Feed fruit trees approximately every three weeks during their growing season with a half or quarter dose of fertilizer to encourage them to produce fruit and grow strongly for next year's fruit.

Peach brown rot may result from overwatering close to harvest, so irrigate trees deeply but less frequently.

You can prevent fungal and bacterial mildews and rots on grapes by pruning away some of the foliage. When grapes are pea-sized, clear away leaves about six inches away from bunches. Better air circulation won't let the rots get started. Keep leaves on the sunny south side of the clusters, however, for shade.

Ornamentals

Sow or transplant alyssum, globe amaranth, celosia (cockscomb), cleomes, coreopsis, cosmos, foxgloves, gazanias, marigolds, nasturtiums, nicotianas, portulaca (moss and sun rose), salvias, sanvitalia, statice, sunflowers, tithonias, and zinnias.

Keep seed trays or beds moist until seeds have germinated and seedlings have two true leaves. Then water less frequently to encourage deep rooting.

Transplant these and ageratum, asters, fibrous begonias, caladiums, calendulas, campanula, clarkias (godetia), dahlias, gloriosa and marguerite and Shasta daisies, dianthus, dusty miller, forget-me-nots, gaillardias, geraniums, hibiscus, hollyhocks, hostas, iceplant, ivies, impatiens, lantanas, lavenders, linarias, lobelias, Michaelmas daisy, penstemons, periwinkles, petunias, phlox, potentillas (cinquefoil), rudbeckias, stocks, verbenas, and violas.

Tithonia--Mexican Sunflower--epitomizes the hot summer sun. Photo by Yvonne Savio,

For fragrance, choose gardenias, jasmine, and lilac.

For color in shady areas, choose, begonia, coleus, impatiens, lobelia, and torenia.

Provide transplants with shade for at least a week, now that the sun is intense, and keep them evenly moist.

For late-summer color from bulbs, plant tuberous begonias, cannas, gladiolus, montbretias, and tigridias.

Store spring-flowering bulbs in a cool, dry, dark place. Lift and divide daffodils and bearded irises if they are crowded or didn't bloom well this spring. Replant them in soil enriched with compost and rock phosphate.

Stake tall-growing dahlias, delphiniums, gladiolus, and lilies--unless you prefer the more casual draping look.

Plant palms, cacti, and succulents. Let the soil dry between waterings, and provide light shade during the hottest portion of the day for the more sensitive ones.

Remove spent blooms and cut back shrubs, including azaleas, camellias, forsythia, flowering quince, lilac, rhododendrons, spiraea, Rose hugonis, and weigela. Remove old, deformed, and dead branches at the soil level; and trim off about a third of the old growth.

Prune wisteria to shape and control its growth.

Pinch back tips and faded blooms from alyssum, tuberous begonias, carnations, chrysanthemums, dianthus, delphiniums, fuchsias, ger-aniums, hydrangeas, lobelias, marguerites, and penstemons to encourage bushier growth and more flowering.

Root woody cuttings of azalea, chrysanthemum, carnation, fuchsia, and hydrangea. Choose growth that is somewhat woody and not still bright green and pliable. Cut a five- or six- inch piece, and strip off all of the leaves but the tiny young top growth and one or two well-developed leaves. Place the cutting in light, sandy soil or plant-ing mix up to the bottom leaf. Sprinkle the foliage and thoroughly wet the soil mixture. Provide filtered light in a sheltered location and keep soil mix moist until the rootings are well-established, in about a month. Then they can be transplanted.

Long, supple branches of azaleas, forsythias, and viburnums can be rooted for new plants. Bend branch tips to a shallow ditch a foot long. Cover the branch with soil up to the top cluster of new foliage. Hold it in place with a rock. Keep the soil moist. Rootlets will form, and new plants will be ready for transplanting in about a year.

Prune or sheer hedges so the top is slightly more narrow than the base. Otherwise, the "bare bones" will show below a puff top of foliage.

Lightly prune, feed, and water roses on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to encourage them to flower continuously into the late fall. Trim faded blooms down to the first five-part leaf or further to gently shape the plant. New blooms will appear in about three weeks. This gentle pruning to shape the plant also strengthens the lower canes and root system.

Cut roses last longer when cut late in the day, unlike other blooms, which last longer when cut early in the morning. Those cut after 4:30 p.m. will last up to ten hours longer than those cut at approximately 8:00 a.m. The sugar that the leaves manufacture and store during the day remains in the leaves, nourishing the blooms. In flowers cut early in the morning, those sugars have traveled to the stem and roots during the night, so there's little left in the leaves to feed the blooms.

Make sure azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons get sufficient moisture throughout the summer, when they set the buds for next year's flowers. Mulch plants after watering well to moderate soil temperature and maintain moisture.

Indoor plants, except for African violets and their relatives, can take a summer breather outdoors. Gently wash the dust from plant leaves (both upper and lower surfaces) and remove damaged foliage. Repot them with fresh potting soil or mix. Place them away from wind and direct sun on a patio or under a tree or roof overhang, and provide sufficient water during hot spells.

Enjoy your night-blooming cereus for up to a week by cutting and refrigerating the blossoms. Cut them when they're open the widest--before they begin to close--and place them in a quart jar with water covering the cut edge of the stem. Replace the jar's top or secure a plastic bag to the top of the jar with a rubber band. Place the jar in a spot in the refrigerator where you can enjoy the bloom each time you open the door. Because it's cold and dark in there, the blossom thinks it's still night and stays open for up to a week.

Another trick to keep the cereus bloom from closing is to melt a few drops of candlewax into the center. This allows you to enjoy the bloom and its fragrance in an arrangement at room temperature for two or three days.

You can use less water and still have a beautiful lawn. Water early in the morning, preferably before 7 a.m. Water deeply once a week (but not more than twice a week) to promote deep rooting and reduce evaporation. Remove a plug of grass to make sure the water is reaching below the root zone. Wait to water until the grass is a dull green color instead of bright green, and it's slightly wilted--older leaf blades will begin to fold lengthwise into a tight "V" shape. Don't fertilize heavily with nitrogen, since rapid leaf growth requires more water.

Proper mowing helps grass grow deeper roots and encourages much side-branching for a thicker carpet. For perennial ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, and tall fescues, set mower height at two to three inches. For common Bermuda lawns, set it at one inch; for hybrid Bermudas, three-quarters of an inch. For St. Augustine, it should be one and a quarter inches. Mow often enough so you never remove more than a third of the length of the grass blades, or you'll stress the plants; they recover slowly during summer heat. Keep mower blades sharp; when blades are dull, more gas or electricity is needed to mow, and rough edges of grass blades invite dieback and diseases.

General

Feed all plants with a balanced, long-release fertilizer containing micronutrients in addition to the basic nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash/potassium (N- P-K). Well-nourished plants not only develop into stronger plants and produce flowers and fruits and vegetables longer, they are better-protected against in-sects and diseases and better withstand heat and water stress.

An excellent "garden tea" fertilizer solution for general garden use is a mixture of one tablespoon fish emulsion, one-half teaspoon seaweed or kelp, and one gallon water. Spray this onto leaves, and irrigate root zones of vegetables, ornamentals, trees, and vines every two weeks throughout the growing season. It will help increase plant vigor and reduce insect damage. When applied later in the fall, it will help to harden plants off for cold weather.

If azaleas, gardenias, and other shrubs and citrus have yellow leaves but the veins remain green, they're suffering from iron chlorosis. Water in some chelated iron or iron sulfate to the soil around the plant roots. Chelating transforms the iron in the soil so plants can absorb it.

Water the garden deeply every week or two, depending on how con-sistently hot the weather has been and whether plant roots have grown deep into the soil. Tomatoes and other large plants in clay loam soil use about one foot of water in three days of hot, dry weather. Some wilting of foliage at the end of a hot, dry day is to be expected, but wilting through to the following morning indicates the immediate need for a deep watering for the roots and a gentle sprinkling of the foliage.

Refrain from overhead watering when the evenings remain warm, especially when leaves can't dry off by sunset. Fungal diseases thrive when air temperatures remain between 70 and 90 degrees; and they need only two to four hours of moist, warm conditions to develop.

Build donut-shaped water basins around trees and plants. Start the inner wall of the basin about two inches from the plant stem, or a foot away from a tree trunk. Form the outer wall of the basin just beyond the plant's or tree's dripline. Fill the area between the two walls with irrigation water. The walls allow it to soak in slowly and deeply. Keeping the water away from the stem or trunk prevents rot from too much moisture at the base. Also, keep mulch the same distance away from the stem or trunk to allow sufficient air circulation for the roots.

Keep adding to mulches throughout the summer to conserve water, keep roots cool, and foil weeds. Remember to water well before applying the mulch, or you'll insulate dry soil rather than moist soil. Pile mulch two to six inches deep under shrubs, trees, vines, flower and vegetable beds. Let grass clippings dry out a bit before piling them (or just spread them thinly), or they'll clump into a mat that's impervious to later watering.

Fireblight (leaves that look burnt on the tips) can be lessened by spraying a solution of one-half water and one-half apple cider vinegar. Respray at two-week intervals during the growing season, or after rains or overhead sprinkling.

Pin a facecloth or hand towel to your waistband to wipe the sweat off your forehead and out of your eyes while working in the garden on a hot day.

Use pliers to pull tree seedlings without having them break off at ground level and grow back stronger than ever. Grasp the stem at the soil line, carefully wind the stem around the pliers, and pull straight upward. The whole root system will come out, even in dry soil. Soaking the area the day or two beforehand will ease the task.

Make a raised rack as a horizontal trellis for vining crops. Fasten chicken wire to a frame a foot above the soil. Plant seeds in compost-enriched hills underneath or along one side. Mulch heavily under and around the racks. If the vines don't climb onto the frames themselves, train them through the holes. Suspended in the air, the vines are less susceptible to downy and powdery mildews, and fewer insects attack the plants. Pests that do appear on the foliage are easy to spot and destroy. The rack also protects the vines from human feet--you never have to tiptoe awkwardly through the patch to check ripening fruit or pull weeds, and the soil in the growing area doesn't get compacted.

Slip half-gallon milk cartons with the tops and bottoms cut off over celery plants to blanch them as they grow.