

CHRIS' TOP 25 TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL GARDEN

In this class I will explain how I approach a garden bed from the soil up and from spring to fall. In this way I will show you what I do each season from start to finish to have the healthiest and most productive garden I can muster.

LAST FALL...

1 - Keep any bare areas of soil that are not planted covered with one inch of homemade compost and 2 to 3 inches of mulch on top of that. Cover to protect mulch from the wind.

2 - Build compost the easy way by thinly layering: Brown dead matter, Green living matter, then a thin layer of soil or compost. Water between each 3 part layer. Continue to build compost in the winter, even though it will be frozen...it will soon thaw and begin to work as spring arrives.

EARLY SPRING...

3 - Two weeks before seeding, or planting starts, remove mulch to warm the soil in the spring sun. Put mulch back into the compost pile, or save for mulching the bed later. Then, gently mix the compost, placed on the bed last fall, into the top 2 or 3 inches of soil. This is also the time to add fresh soil should the bed need to be topped up. Most veggies will benefit from a minimum depth of 12 inches for good root growth.

4 - Water the bed thoroughly 1 week before planting seeds or starts. This wakes up the microbes and brings life back to worms that survived the winter. Some worms will survive thanks to that mulch layer you put on. Rake the bed level and then let it rest.

5 - Plant according to soil temperature recommendations listed on seed packets or in your favorite gardening catalog. (Use a quick read meat or soil thermometer)

6 - Follow the recommendation on seed depth and always use a thin floating row cover, right on top of the seed bed, to protect the seed while it's in the phase of breaking the seed coat and sprouting! Water right through the row cover, as this helps to not disturb the seed bed.

7 - When purchasing plants check the underside of leaves for bugs and the roots for over crowding. Always purchase the smallest starts that are not root bound. Old starts have been sitting too long at the nursery, and will be leggy and stressed at transplanting.

8- Plant all starts on a cloudy day or in the early evening, so that the start has a less stressful first day, and I always cover the starts with floating row cover for two weeks after setting out. Water in well. Check them every day for water, wind and heat stress, until they are established.

SPRING...

9 - Water glossy leaved plants on top, and fuzzy leaved plants at soil level. Fuzzy leaves capture and hold water leading to fungal growth like powdery mildew. Avoid overwatering by testing moisture levels with your finger. Only water as deep as the roots of the plant. Oxygen in the soil pore space is as crucial as water in the soil pores!

10 - As soon as plants are up and growing (about 2 inches above the soil) mulch right up to their stems. This prevents soil compaction when watering, prevents dry soil and keeps microbes alive and working for your plants. Microbes break down soil components and release nutrients to plant roots.

SUMMER DAYS

11 - Take the time to thin when plants are small to prevent root stress. Practice the art of cutting crowded plants off at the soil surface to thin, rather than pulling. This is especially important for thinning crops like carrots. Eat those baby plants when appropriate.

12 - Only plant what you truly love to eat! Plant veggies that are easy for our short 80 day growing season, i.e. - all the cool season greens and root crops that prosper here.

13 - Begin a fertilizer regimen one month after planting - most plants benefit from a broad spectrum fertilizer with a balance of NPK = Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium. Side dress and water in well.

14 - Practice the skill of succession planting - every two to three weeks. Examples are: lettuce, spinach, carrots, beets, arugula. Plan the open space for your next seeding date accordingly.

15 - Taste your veggies often and eat them young while they are at their tastiest. Old veggies get tough and bitter. Pull old plantings when you no longer want to eat them. Tough, bitter veggies covered in insects are no fun. Now is the time to replant!

16 - When planting seedlings, space them so that the top growth will just touch when they are at full maturity. This will shade the soil and take advantage of precious space constraints.

17 - Every time you water or harvest watch for insects and pathogens. Take action before things get out of hand. Use fine insect netting for bugs like flea beetles and cabbage moth larvae. Use floating row cover for aphids and grasshoppers. Remove all yellowing, infected leaves, shoots and roots from the bed to keep veggies healthy. Be brave!

18 - Many veggies can be harvested throughout the growing season for more production. Chard and kale for example, benefit from continually harvesting the bottom leaves by snapping them off at the central stem. This tricks the plant into producing more leaves, creating a harvest that lasts all season. Always leave 7 to 8 healthy leaves coming from the growing center for good photosynthesis.

19 - Re-plant in late summer (late July to early August for a late fall harvest). Seeds will sprout quickly in warm soil, and grow quickly in the summer sun. Then as fall cools off, greens will prosper and be pest free!

20 - Take stock of what went well and think about what you did not really want to eat, or what was not worth the work, and regroup for next year.

FALL APPROACHES...

21 - To clean up the bed either cut all plants off at the soil surface or pull plants, with root and all. Leaving roots in the soil benefits the soil microbes over the winter, and these will decompose with winter weather. For really big tough roots like broccoli, cabbage, and sunflower, you will want to pull and compost. Give the bed a good watering, and rake it flat. If compost is available, cover the bed with one inch, then 2 to 3 inches of mulch. My favorite mulch is a combo of grass clippings and shredded leaves. Microbes and worms will survive and continue to work the soil until the ground freezes.

22 - Get to know the gardeners in your neighborhood or in your community garden and ask lots of questions about when, why and how they are choosing to seed, plant and harvest.

23 - When you are ready to dig deeper go to the net and search for: Farmers Almanac - planting calendar. When you plug in your zip code it will give you a chart about when to start seed indoors, plant seedlings out and when to plant seed outdoors.

24 - Seed storing note - The rule is: Cold, dry and dark. I like to store my seed in an old cookie tin, because it creates a good seal and it lets in no light. This is kept in my garage over the winter...where its cold. And don't forget about the free seed to be "traded" at your very own seed bank - The Ridgway Public Seed Library!

25 - Have fun with all of your gardening experiences. Continue to learn something new each year - this could take a lifetime!