

The Garden \$aver

Welcome to the first edition of the Garden Saver!

In this edition we are sharing tips that focus on soil health and pest and disease prevention – two things that go hand in hand. Healthy soil grows healthy plants. Darren Chapman offers tips for using cover crops to improve soil health. Bill McKelvey shares information about garden hygiene to limit pests and disease. You'll also find some information on how to harvest, cure and store your sweet potato crop, along with a couple of recipes that make good use of summer vegetables.

No-Fuss Soil Improvement with Cover Crops

Darren Chapman

Soil is an amazing thing when you think about it. It is alive, with millions of microorganisms found in just a spoonful. It holds water and nutrients to nourish plants. It is also something that can be improved with good gardening practices.

A spring and summer of gardening can provide a lot of fresh, healthy produce, but can leave your garden soil in need of some care. Tilling or working in compost or aged manure can help. Another option is to *use cover crops* – crops grown in the garden for the main purpose of improving the soil.

Easy to grow and good to eat, cover crops include varieties of radishes and turnips. These crops pull in nutrients from deep in the soil. They also break up the soil and cut down on weeds that can take over during the fall. Both radishes and turnips are members of the mustard family and give you and your soil the nutrients and energy you both need. Varieties of radish (Daikon, Tillage, China Rose, etc.) will provide much needed air for thick, clay-like soils. Turnips help to keep weeds away with their larger, above-ground growth. Using cover crops in your garden can increase your yield and improve your garden's soil.

Simply scatter the seeds over the surface of the garden and use a rake to cover them with a bit of soil. Let them grow and eat some of the produce if you'd like. They will naturally die over the winter. The plants will break down and provide benefits for next year's garden.

Be sure and look for some of these cover crop seeds at one of Grow Well Missouri's seed distribution days or find similar varieties at your local seed dealer.

Sweet Potatoes Will Be Ready Soon!

If you planted sweet potatoes in June, they will likely be ready to harvest by the end of September. You can let them grow in to early October, but be sure to harvest them before the first frost.

To harvest, find the base of the plants and trim off the vines, leaving a few inches of stem above the ground. Pull the vines away and add them to your compost pile. Use a stiff-tined garden fork to lift the potatoes out of the ground. The potatoes grow in a big clump, so start digging well away from the base of the plant to avoid stabbing them. Gently brush off the loose soil and lay them aside as you harvest the rest of the potatoes. Handle them carefully since the skins are very thin at this point.

Sweet potatoes need to be cured for about ten days and should not be washed until you are ready to eat them. Lay them flat on screens or tables in an indoor, sheltered location (some people use a garage or shed). Cure them in a warm and humid place if possible to make them sweeter.

To store sweet potatoes, layer them with newspaper in a laundry basket or other ventilated box. Ideal storage conditions are cool (55 degrees F) and humid (85% relative humidity).

Once they are stored, they will keep for many months (I've had some keep for a year!). Use them in your favorite recipe and share them with friends and family over the holidays.

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Good Garden Hygiene Leads to Fewer Pests and Diseases

Bill McKelvey

As the garden season winds down, it's easy to let things go. Weeds may have taken over, crops may have died from pests or disease, and your motivation may have moved elsewhere. But fall is the best time to take action to keep pests and disease out of next year's garden.

One practice is to *remove dead plants from the garden* as crops finish for the season. Pests and diseases love those wilted vines, rotten fruits, and dead leaves. In general, it is fine to add dead plant materials to a compost pile. But if you think that your plants died from a disease remove them from your yard entirely.

Weeding the garden in the fall is another way to take good care of it. Some plant diseases can grow on weeds and then spread to your crops. Tilling or cultivating the entire garden is a good practice as well, including adding compost or aged manure.

Lastly, don't forget your garden tools. Garden tools and other equipment that comes into contact with soil need to be cleaned and sanitized at the end of the year. Remove as much dirt as possible and then dip the tools for a couple of minutes in a solution of one-part household bleach to nine-parts water. Let the tools air dry and then store for the winter.

Taste it at home!

Fresh Tomato Salsa with Cumin

ALL YOU NEED:

- 3 cups chopped tomatoes
- 1/2 cup chopped green bell pepper
- 1 cup onion, diced
- 1/4 cup minced fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 4 teaspoons chopped fresh jalapeno pepper (more or less depending on your taste)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

ALL YOU DO:

- Chop vegetables.
- Stir the tomatoes, green bell pepper, onion, cilantro, lime juice, jalapeno pepper, cumin, salt, and pepper together in a bowl.
- Makes around a quart. Unused salsa can be kept in the refrigerator for about a week.

Roasted Zucchini and Summer Squash

ALL YOU NEED:

- Zucchini and/or Summer squash
- Oil (olive, canola, safflower)
- Salt
- Pepper

ALL YOU DO:

- Preheat oven to 375 degrees F.
- Slice vegetables into 3/4 inch wide round slabs.
- Place vegetables flat on a baking sheet or pan and lightly drizzle with oil.
- Add salt and pepper.
- Toss and turn vegetables to coat both sides with oil.
- Place in the oven and bake for approximately 20 minutes or until browned on the top and tender.

