

Too Hot to Weed? Plan Ahead!

Funny thing about strawberries; they are such a favorite, think strawberry ice cream, strawberry short cake, but unless you happen upon locally grown berries you are sure to be disappointed. Sometimes you might not know what you were eating were you not looking at your spoon. The taste has escaped somewhere during that cross-continental trip.

Rather than waiting for someone else to plant a field for us to pick perhaps it is time for each of us to nurture a patch of just a few square feet. Strawberries freeze beautifully and the jam is a joy on cold winter mornings. Another reason to grow your own is the recent news that conventionally grown and shipped strawberries had the highest pesticide levels of any of the 42 fruits and vegetables tested. Oh dear!

My experience growing them was not a success: the rabbits won, the birds placed, and I showed, barely. There are two kinds, June bearing which are productive for years and the everbearing (long-season) day-neutral varieties. The latter are usually planted newly each year and love full sun and rich soil. They can be kept year to year but to have them be productive you have to provide healthy weedless space for the new plants to branch out from the original plant.

Strawberries may be one of those crops that would be more easily planted, protected, and harvested in a raised bed. It is important to use a soaker hose to keep the soil moist and to keep the leaves and fruit dry. A fairly heavy pine needle or straw mulch will keep them clean. Fall is a good time to plant them and they are becoming available in the catalogs that are beginning to come now. It is good to check the catalogs because as newer varieties are developed the ongoing research also shows better ways to grow them.

For several years I grew blueberries as ornamentals in large pots. The birds benefited and I concluded that they grow better in the ground. Newer cultivars have received attention as being more beautiful plants. Very nice, but the fruit is surely the main reason to plant them? Might they be more desirable if the berries were more than blue? Someone at the University of Georgia thinks so and they have one called 'Summer Sunset', a complex hybrid with rabbiteye genes and with berries that develop from yellow green to red to purple to black. I have no idea about the taste but they must be fun to watch grow.

Fun, too are fruits and vegetables that come in non-standard colors. I include myself in the old codger group that expects watermelons, when sliced open, to be a luscious red, not a faded yellow. But I am open to Swiss chard having bright stems of yellow, red, and orange so long as the leaves stay their usual green.

Meantime I reserve judgment about cucumbers with surprise innards. There have been great improvements in cucumbers the last decade or so. Some have edible skins so don't need peeling and now there is one that is orange. This has been done to add the nutritional value of beta-carotene to cucumbers.

This orange cucumber may be a boon to mom's whose kids refuse to touch carrots. This new salad fixing is the result of a cross between an otherwise unattractive orange Chinese cuke and our familiar pickling variety.

Before the one-size-fits-all model of agriculture there were more than 14,000 cultivars of apples in North America. Today 90% of apples we have belong to just 11 varieties. Your grandfather can probably name several that grew well here. I have no idea what the name of the old tree we inherited when we came to Gloucester. Large unshapely spotty green apples were heaped on a part of the huge old tree gradually collapsing in the front field. Those apples, as the neighbors knew, made wonderful applesauce, but the variety remained a mystery. Of the trees we planted, only the 'Golden Delicious' tolerated our weather. Do apples prefer higher elevations perhaps, or cooler nights, or colder winters? Eventually there will be a strain genetically programmed to match the microclimate of every county in Virginia, don't you think?