

NON-CROP

- Q. My family has been enjoying our fireplace during the cold weather, and we have an abundance of wood ashes. I have been scattering them around our fruit trees and in my garden, but I am worried that I may have put too many. How much should I use?
- A. Wood ashes contain a small amount of mineral elements (esp. potassium) and are alkaline. The main problem in many areas of Louisiana is alkaline soils which do not need help becoming more alkaline. Application of small amounts of wood ashes are not harmful to acid soils, but excesses should be avoided. Use the ash at twice the rate of ag. Lime for a similar pH change.
- Q. Why shouldn't we save seed from hybrid tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, etc.?
- A. The definition of a hybrid is "the offspring of plants of different genotypes, varieties, species or genera." Hybrid seeds of plants which you purchase are the result of a controlled cross-breeding process. The controlled cross yields seed which are known to produce plants with certain desirable characteristics such as disease resistance, nematode resistance, large fruit, earliness, etc. Seed produced by the fruit of a hybrid plant may or may not possess the number and degree of desirable characteristics of the hybrid. Purchasing new seed or plants each year insures that desirable characteristics will be present.
- Q. I have heard many people talk about washing frost off plant leaves to protect them. Is this a good technique?
- A. You answer this question. Take a glass, put it in the freezer for several hours, then fill with hot water and you will have your answer. Don't do this experiment with your favorite glass because it won't be usable afterwards. It will shatter exactly as frozen plant cells do when warm faucet water strikes them. The best way to prevent cell damage after a light freeze has occurred is to attempt to slow-thaw these cells. This can be accomplished by covering plants with a sheet or blanket to shield them from the warming sun rays which will do the same harm as faucet water. Remember, survival is possible only after a light frost or freeze; after a hard, cold spell, these techniques are wasted effort.

- Q. How important is variety selection with regard to canning and freezing of vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, etc.?
- A. The main consideration for preserving garden vegetables is to be sure and use top quality produce. Select high yielding, disease resistant varieties recommended for your area. Preserve only good produce for later consumption.
- Q. What is a good way to keep seed left over from this year's garden?
- A. Seed should be left in the original packets or labeled envelopes and placed in an "air-tight" container such as a wide-mouthed jar. For long-term storage, 2 tablespoons of powdered milk should be securely wrapped in tissue paper and placed in the bottom of the jar. The powdered milk acts as a desiccant and lengthens storage "life" of garden seed. Place the jar in the refrigerator until next gardening season.
- Q. Are the dead grass clippings that I am getting from dethatching the lawn good for mulching my garden?
- A. Yes, but be sure they are good and dead. Otherwise, you'll be sprigging your garden with grass. This makes an excellent mulching material. Since this grass is in small, chopped pieces, it will break down easier. Don't use these clippings if a herbicide has been recently applied.
- Q. I have heard that some leaves "poison" the soil! I have an abundance of pecan leaves and would like to use them for compost. Are pecan leaves harmful?
- A. Not a single case of pecan leaves damaging a garden spot has been reported. In fact, these leaves have been recommended as a mulch for several years because pecan leaves are fibrous and decompose slowly. Possibly rumors of pecan leaves damaging growing plants arise from the fact that pecan leaves contain tannic acid. When tannic acid reacts with alkaline soil, a neutral organic salt, called calcium tannate, is formed. This compound is not detrimental. Mix other types of organic matter or leaves with pecan leaves rather than making a compost of pure pecan leaves.

Q. How about using sawdust as a mulch? I know that extra nitrogen must be added, but should I expect any other problem?

A. You are well on your way by knowing that extra nitrogen in small, constant doses is required. If you use pure sawdust, it may cake up and form an impenetrable barrier to water. Water slowly and check depth of penetration after watering.

Q. Our garden did not do well last year. We think our soil must be worn out and want to haul in some more. What type should be used?

A. First of all, your soil is NOT worn out. There are farms that have been cropped continuously for 70 years. The addition of organic matter (crop residue, grass clippings, leaves, etc.) and proper fertilization keeps any soil "healthy." Also, do not work your soil when it's too wet as damage to the soil's structure can occur.

Q. My late-planted okra and tomatoes are beautiful now and full of fruit. However, one end of my okra row and a few of my tomato plants are small and sickly. Is this a lack of water?

A. It may be a lack of water but more likely you have nematodes. Check for swellings on the roots of slow-growing, non-productive plants. Use the LSU Nematode Advisory Service to be sure. If you do have nematodes, remove the existing crop and treat with Vapam for control.

Q. Is it true that organically grown vegetables are better and more nutritious?

A. Contrary to popular belief, research has not shown a nutritional advantage of organically fertilized vegetables over those grown with chemical fertilizers. The same plant nutrients which are supplied by chemical fertilizers are derived from organic fertilizer, and these nutrients must be in an ionic form before they can be absorbed by the roots. With an equal amount furnished the plant from either type of fertilizer, the nutritional composition of the produce will be exactly the same. The wonderful flavor which we enjoy from garden vegetables has to do mainly with freshness and a timely harvest. If organically grown produce was not properly protected from insects and disease, it may be of lower quality.

Q. How long can I expect garden seeds left over from this fall and stored in a sealed jar to remain good?

A. The life span of seeds varies from a few weeks to several hundred years depending upon the kind of vegetable and how they are stored. Generally, most vegetable seeds will last from three to fifteen years if properly stored. Seeds stored in a cool, dry place will live the longest. Seeds of some vegetables tend to live longer than seeds of other vegetables. The following groupings can generally be made:

Group A* Short Lived	Group B Medium Lived	Group C Long Lived
Onions	Beans	Cucumbers
Corn	Carrots	Turnips
Okra	Peas	Watermelon
Parsnips	Tomatoes	Eggplant
*Group A is 1, maybe 2 years		

Q. I would like to grow my own mushrooms at home. Is this feasible or practical in Louisiana?

A. The production requirements for mushrooms are so exacting and require such controlled conditions that home production would probably be very disappointing. Since mushrooms do not require light for growth, they can be grown in darkness for better control of temperature and humidity. There are some very small home owner kits available for sale at nurseries and garden centers and through seed catalogs. These kits will introduce you to the concept of mushroom production, but they will generally provide too few mushrooms for most families' needs.

Q. What is this vegetable advertised as a “topato”?

A. The word “Topato” is a patented name which has been applied to a tomato plant and potato plant growing in a very close proximity. Many home gardeners who read the ads conclude that one plant would produce potatoes on the root and tomatoes on the branches. When the home gardener orders a topato, he will get a potato seed piece which has been holed out. This potato shell is filled with planting medium or a type of soil substitute. A packet of tomato seed is also included with the purchase of the potato shells. The idea is to plant a tomato seed into the center of the potato shell. Then, plant the shell into the garden soil. The idea would be that the potato plant would produce tubers and that the tomato plant would yield tomato fruits. Provided both the potato seed piece and the tomato seeds germinate, the tomato plant will produce tomatoes and the potato plant will produce potatoes.

Q. What insects will marigolds repel from my garden?

A. Marigolds do not actually repel or prevent insect damage from adjacently grown plants. They probably get this reputation due to their supposable relationship with nematodes. This flowering plant is not a host for root knot nematodes, one of the most serious pests we encounter in gardening.

It is one of the preferred hosts for one of the most destructive garden insects—the spider mite and harbors leaf miners. Planting marigolds in a home garden is an invitation to almost pure disaster. The spider mite is one of the most difficult garden insects to control and can become almost as serious a problem as nematodes. Planting marigolds in the garden will not control nematodes, but will insure a chance of spider mite problems.

Q. Are the varieties of mushrooms which come up periodically in my yard edible?

A. Several species of wild mushrooms which occur in Louisiana are edible and some are of excellent quality. But, many others are highly poisonous. A safe recommendation is to never eat mushrooms which are harvested from your yard or from wooded areas. Mushrooms purchased at the store are the only ones that are safe to eat.

Q. When is compost ready to be used?

A. In general, several months are required for proper composting of most materials. If kept moist, a good compost mixture started in early spring should be ready to use as a mulch or turned into the soil by early fall. However, this will depend a lot on how the compost pile is handled, whether or not it is located in the sun or shade and how often it is turned. A properly prepared compost pile should reach an internal temperature of 160°F, within a matter of weeks. If these conditions occur, then the organic material will be usable within a matter of 2 or 3 months.

Q. What is meant by 'biennial' and which vegetables are classed as biennial vegetables?

A. Biennial vegetables are those that normally require two years from seed to flowering. A cold period after maturity is normally required. Biennial vegetables include beets, brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, chard, collard, endive, kale, kohlrabi, leek, onion, parsley, parsnip, rutabaga, salsify, and turnip. Remember that if young biennial plants are subjected to cold weather early during their growth, seed production may occur the first season.

Q. What are the best temperature and humidity conditions for storing surplus vegetables from my home garden?

A. Vegetables differ in their temperature and humidity needs for storage. The root crops and cabbage need a cold temperature (32 to 35°F), high humidity and moderate ventilation. Root crops can be stored in a cold place in polyethylene bags or boxes with a few holes for ventilation. Potatoes need a moderately cool temperature (40 to 45°F) and a moist atmosphere, while onions need a cool temperature (32 to 35°F), dry humidity and plenty of air movement. Pumpkins and squash need a moderately cool temperature (50 to 55°F) and a moderately dry atmosphere. Consult various garden publications for ideal storage conditions for individual vegetables.

Q. In designing my vegetable garden, should the rows run east and west or north and south or does it really make a difference?

A. The main thing that should determine which way the rows run in your garden is the slope of the land. Wherever the garden soil is not level, rows should generally run across the slope to reduce soil washing and erosion. Otherwise, direction of garden rows is normally north to south although this is not so important.

Q. What are the advantages of adding organic matter to my garden soil?

A. Organic matter worked into the garden soil will help improve soil texture and thus makes the soil easier to work, increases the water holding capacity of sandy soils, supplies many needed plant nutrients, improves the condition for the development of beneficial organisms such as earthworms, slows leaching of nutrients by providing a holding system and speeds excess water movement and drainage through the soil.

Q. What is meant by 'organic gardening'?

A. To the organic food enthusiast, organic gardening implies production of vegetables on soils with high levels of organic matter supplied from animal manure, crop residue, compost, etc. and without supplementary mineral elements except those from natural mineral fertilizers obtained from naturally occurring deposits. It is also assumed that any attempt to control disease, insects and nematodes will be by use of resistant varieties, other biological means or cultural practices, or with naturally occurring pesticides obtained from plants. Weeds will be controlled by cultural practices and no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides will be used.