

End of the summer

The end of summer is the right time to do a roundup of the past season's garden.



One year, I build a set of tiny raised beds, 30 inches square and less than a foot high, to optimize growing space in my little backyard. They worked for leafy greens – spinach and leaf lettuce – but they bolted early. Another year, I grew all my vegetables in pots. Pots can be an “iffy” proposition, especially in our climate, but it is possible to treat each pot as a mini garden plot. This year, I used both raised beds and pots.

I use the biggest pots available from any home store, buying them at the end of the season on clearance. Although terra cotta is gorgeous, I avoid using clay pots. In this desert climate, they are impractical. The large ones are very expensive as well as fragile. Not only are they breakable, but being made of clay, they begin to degrade when it gets hot and dry. The clay pots stay indoors. I use attractive plastic or condensed foam containers.

Gardening in pots means being able to move them around to find the best spot for light, shade and wind protection. I have grown tomatoes, peppers, and salad greens, all with their own unique preferences, this way. Watering is a major issue in the desert southwest, but using a hose and watering can twice daily is out of the question. A drip irrigation system, with one emitter for each pot, helps solve the problem.

A “double potting” approach, putting one pot inside a larger one, slows water loss. The inner pot, which need not be attractive, is placed on top of rocks inside a larger one for drainage. The worst thing that could happen would be to kill roots by surrounding them with airless mud. Sitting on two or three inches of big rock gives ample room for excess water to drain. As water evaporates, the humidity around the crops improves.

Each crop had its own set of preferences. In early spring, I took a small handful of mesclun seeds, a mixture of several lettuces, and scattered them, not too thickly, over the top of the soil. I tamped them down to cover, watered thoroughly, and placed the pot where it got northern exposure - very bright, indirect, light. We were eating fresh salad daily until summer. Once it became hot, the few remaining plants faded, but greens will be on the list for planting mid-September. Leafy greens will grow when temperatures are lower than 80°. I will keep them going, adding new seeds every week or so.

Lettuce and spinach are easy. What about the garden stars, tomatoes? The short answer is – surprisingly well. I started seeds indoors, and transplanted in March. Fast growing cherry and grape tomatoes thrived in pots, and the Early Girls were productive in their raised beds. I cut them back in July, and they will produce a fall crop.

Our climate is difficult, but with a little creativity and protection, it is possible to grow year-round.

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