

Summer temperatures are here!

Once again, we will rely on air conditioning to make our homes, cars and offices livable. Plants do not have this luxury, unfortunately.

When it gets much above 85°F, many of our favorite garden vegetables cease to thrive. This is the hot season when tomatoes can suffer sunburn, and when lettuce, cabbage and spinach bolt (produce a flower stalk). Sadly, annoying creatures like aphids make their appearance.

Unless one wishes to harvest their seeds, bolted leafy greens will have to be removed from the garden by about the end of May. Although their leaves become astonishingly bitter, they will continue to take up water as long as they are in the ground, until they have completed their flowering. This would be a waste of our limited water supply as well a waste of precious gardening space.



Sunscald Tomatoes

Depending on the type of tomato, they will show various kinds of sun damage when they are subjected to high light and temperatures. If they have reached their full size but are yet green, they may actually become bleached to a very pale, blistered green, inedible. Distressing as that is, it is not the only heat-related problem. Various cultivars show different kinds of distress: some develop radial cracks in the fruit, starting at the stem; others form concentric circles of cracks. A few tomatoes get cracks along the entire

length of the fruit. While this damage does not hurt the flavor of the fruit, it is certainly unsightly, and cutting out the cracked portion means losing some of its delicious flesh.

Peppers are somewhat more heat tolerant, and there is a little literature that indicates the hotter peppers are even more tolerant than bell-type peppers.

Given that much of the garden salad does not thrive in the Mojave summer, can anything grow well during the hottest months? The answer is an enthusiastic “yes.”

Think about plants that we associate with hot areas. Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is essential in gumbo, a treat from Louisiana. If it receives sufficient water, this cousin of cotton and hibiscus will flourish all summer! The key is to harvest the fruits regularly while small; if they remain on the plant, they become woody.

Although we mainly eat sweet potatoes in late fall, around Thanksgiving, they grow best during periods of high temperatures. Because they require long days to produce their storage roots, it is important that they are planted soon. They do require fertile soil and ample water. If they receive these two vital elements, they will be ready for harvest by late November, or earlier.

Melons, pumpkins and other hard shelled squashes are good choices in a desert summer garden. In fact, they barely grow if temperatures drop below 60°F. These can be planted as late as Father's Day, which some Master Gardeners insist will prevent them from being plagued by squash bugs. Melons do require abundant moisture and good fertility management, in particular compost and bone meal. Pumpkins should be harvested around Halloween.

Even in mid-summer the Mojave is still a gardener's paradise!

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