



Growing Against the Clock

I've been flower gardening for decades now, and attempting to grow vegetables ever since I moved to Haddam eight years ago. I like to think I'm fairly knowledgeable, but this summer, I'm as ignorant as any beginner. This summer, I'm attempting to grow most of the flowers for a family wedding, and I'm learning a whole new set of rules.

Generally, when planting from seed, timing is dictated by the last frost date. Nearly every seed packet instructs you to count back so many weeks before that magic date: ten or twelve weeks for slow germinators, like snapdragons and lisianthus, but only four to six weeks for sprinters like zinnias and marigolds, after which they'll be mature enough to set outside. When growing for a wedding, though, the only date that matters is the Big Day, and the only timing that matters is the number of days from germination to bloom. So I counted backwards for each flower, added an extra week just to be sure, and started planting earlier—sometimes much earlier—than the packets suggested. My seedlings grew strong under new full-spectrum grow lights and lots of loving attention. So much so, in fact, that when the time finally arrived to put them in the garden, many had become rootbound. How much damage was done when I pried them out of their little cells? Has the damage caused setbacks, nullifying my careful charts?

With the exception of a few tomatoes, vegetable gardening was abandoned this year, so all the beds protected by fencing could be used for flowers. All my gardening coffee table books show cutting gardens as colorful, carefree spaces, with flowers jostling each other in summer abundance. But all the real experts—the people who grow flowers to sell—advise consistent spacing to maximize access for fertilization and weeding. And watering: after years of telling myself, "Someday I'm going to get around to that," I have finally acquired hundreds of feet of drip irrigation hose. The packaging instructs the buyer to unroll it to its full length, fill with water, and "allow it to bake in the sun for several hours" to soften and unkink the coils. After a fairly cool May, it'll be over ninety degrees today. Bake-worthy weather, indeed.

Only after the hose is laid out can I proceed to the next step. Once again, the pretty pictures lie. In order to achieve straight stems, I am advised to build a grid over each bed. The laborious way is with crisscrossed twine. A faster but unwieldy and expensive method is to buy cattle fencing and place it over the beds, propped up a foot or more above the flowers. I fear I will never get to this step. Worse, I fear it will be

irrelevant: my oh-so-optimistically grown plants sulked through the May chills, and even consistent high temperatures for the next month may not be enough to get them to the finish line on time.

I've also had a setback in an unexpected area. Back in January, my friend Ann gave me four elephant ear tubers, and they've been growing in pots in my living room ever since. The groom studies elephant behavior, so the ears have special meaning beyond dramatic décor. They looked healthy but a bit leggy, so, a week ago, I moved two outside for better light. Fortunately I didn't have time just then to move the other two, because we had an unseasonably cold, very windy night of driving rain, which left the huge ears tattered and broken. If necessary I can substitute "Humpback Whale" hosta leaves, which have the same size and shape if not the same sentimental value.

Despite the worries and disappointments, one bright spot remains. The bride hopes to carry peonies in her bouquet, and I hope to provide some that are home grown. Peony season is glorious but very brief, and they'll be out of bloom weeks before the ceremony, so special techniques must be called into service. It's hard to believe, but apparently peonies can be cut, wrapped in paper, and stored in a refrigerator for weeks, even months, and then brought into bloom. They have to be cut at precisely the right time: "marshmallow stage," still round, but soft and squishy, with the petals showing, just ready to open. Cut too soon, and they'll never open. Too late, and they will "blow," shattering as they open. I have counted about 18-20 white peony buds in my garden. Every last one will be sacrificed to the cause, in hopes that I get it right for at least a few.

Science meets floral design: Some fruits and vegetables, notably apples and bananas, emit ethylene gas as they ripen, destroying the flowers. My refrigerator's produce drawers are emptied of the culprits, which are banished to a cooler for the duration.

My sister, mother of the bride, thinks I've gone overboard. She may have a point.