

Haddam Garden Club

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Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



At School

I was in my courtyard this morning, deadheading some daisies, when a school bus rumbled past. For the young, it's the start of the school year. For me, it signals the end of another gardening year. That's an illusion, of course: there are still three weeks left until the solstice; another month before the first hard frost; and at least another month after that until the ground freezes and so do I. Still, it's time for taking stock of the year's successes and failures.

For me, this year, the failures outnumber successes by a lamentable margin. The vegetable garden, especially, let me down, and if I'd had to depend on it to feed myself, I'd have starved. The cucumber vines succumbed to disease after producing exactly three fruits (one half-eaten by something while still attached). The zucchini have been somehow ignored by squash borers this summer, and remain green and healthy, but it doesn't matter much, because they produced only a handful of blossoms, nearly all male. Even the tomatoes are disappointing: One plant's branches are weighted to the breaking point with Sungold cherry tomatoes, but the rest look drawn from The Nightmare Before Christmas, with absurdly long, skinny stems disinclined to bother with leaves, flowers, or fruit. I had conscientiously staked each when planting, but might as well not have bothered, because a four-foot stake is of little use to an eight-foot stem. Thank you, incessant rain.

When I started my first vegetable garden six years' ago, I imagined it looking like the pretty pictures in my coffee table books, with neat rows of thriving greens, accented with bright flowers. For the first year, and even the second, I had the beginnings of that fantasy potager. But then the insect pests realized there was a bonanza of host crops, the woodchucks, raccoons and squirrels relocated their foraging to their new pantry, and the perennial plants—grapes, blackberries, strawberries and peaches—began to mature enough to produce fruit. I'm not going to have any meaningful harvest until I extend the wire fencing at least a foot underground, all the way around; block the gaps between the fence and the adjacent deck; and cover every blessed plant with bird netting. Instead of a bucolic scene I'll have an armed camp. Meanwhile the point at which the value of what I can grow exceeds the cost of all these barriers recedes ever farther toward infinity. The dog—or more accurately, the woodchuck—ate my homework.

So I have to give myself a D-minus in Vegetables for the summer of 2023. Fortunately, the season isn't over yet, so there's still time to plant fall vegetables for extra credit. I've never tried cool-season vegetables before. Never felt the need, as long as the tomatoes and peppers were still producing. But there are plenty of fall crops to choose from, like spinach, beets, carrots, kale, and of course lettuce. If they succeed, it will take away some of the sting of those derelict beds.

The courtyard is in slightly better shape, probably a C+ right now, and may even make it to a B- once the glorious and indestructible mums start to bloom. Everything is wildly overgrown and far too tall, with an unusually high ratio of lush greenery to flowers, again thanks to all the rain. But almost everything did flower, and the space teems with bees and hummingbirds. The traditional favorites with which I started the courtyard garden are mostly European imports, but this spring I added several natives, including blue lobelia, wild bee balm, asters, and black-eyed Susans, and all have outperformed the imports. "Shows improvement."

Garden design experts advise us to limit the variety of plants, suggesting that large blocks of the same plant are more effective than singles polka-dotted around a space. I read this advice, nod my agreement, then proceed to buy every new perennial I encounter. I like to pretend that my style is "English cottage garden" instead of random chaos, but a successful cottage garden takes planning. Fortunately, single specimens have a habit of multiplying into clumps, which I can divide and replant this month to create the desired "drifts" of color. My hope is that the drifts will have a second, more practical effect of crowding out crabgrass. It's too much to expect them to outcompete mugwort, but I keep trying.

As the outdoor part of my gardening curriculum winds down, I'm thinking of adding an elective: the Master Composting class offered at the UConn Agricultural Extension Center. An abundance of compost is just what I need to boost the garden's productivity. And just this morning I had a mini-class in Entomology, when I noticed a very large, very bright orange and black wasp on the bee balm. According to the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, it's Sphex ichneumoneus, the great golden digger wasp. They are ground-nesting and not aggressive, and I was happy to learn that they're native. Isn't she impressive?

Well, I didn't make the Dean's List this summer, but never mind. Every season, the garden has something new to teach me. It may be positive, as in the effortlessly thriving blue lobelia, or the annual increase in hummingbird visits—or not so positive, as in the zucchini's stubborn refusal to fruit, or the race to grab peaches in the nanoseconds between the moment they become fully ripe and the moment the squirrels move in for the heist. It's a lifelong education, and I never get bored.