Choosing This Year's Vegetable All-Star Team

By Laura Huenneke



Borage - Photo by Laura Huenneke



Marigold - Photo by Cynthia Murray

Fall is a great time to pause and reflect on the most recent growing season, and review which of our plants were star performers. It's helpful to note which plant species or varieties we'll definitely grow again, and which didn't perform as well as expected.

A big part of gardening -- whether for flowers, vegetables, or landscaping – is choosing plants intentionally and keeping notes on how each one performs. I've become more systematic about this over the years.

In my vegetable garden, I value reliability across different years (since our weather conditions can vary so much), good flavor, and a long period of steady yields. I'm less concerned about producing a massive harvest all at once, since I'm not growing for sale or preserving for a large family. Of course, your priorities and your growing conditions mean that you may well make different choices.

Below are some of my favorite vegetable choices, tested over several years in my hot, windy garden east of Flagstaff.

- Tomatoes: Each year I grow several varieties, and hold a formal taste test with my family at some point during the season. Flavor is the main attraction here! *San Marzano* paste tomatoes are extremely productive; I've been able to make and freeze copious quantities of tomato sauce each summer. I thank local seed

producer Tina Gustafson for introducing me to the *Black Vernissage* salad tomato; these have been consistently long-yielding in my garden, and the flavor is fantastic. I'm still searching for a true dependable "all-star" cherry tomato or large slicing tomato.

- Beans: For several years I struggled to grow beans, despite living near Doney Park, where beans were historically a major crop. I've had better luck the past few years, with *Tendergreen* bush beans, *Anasazi* dried beans, and *Scarlet Runner Beans* (both for the beans and for the fantastic flowers that attract hummingbirds well into fall). This summer I tried *Seychelles* pole beans, and they were terrific – many weeks of long, thin, stringless, tasty green beans. They may well become a perennial all-star.

- Lettuce: Salad greens are a key focus of my garden, and I have tried dozens of lettuce varieties. My clear favorite is *Marvel of Four Seasons* (or *Merveille des Quatre Saisons*), a heritage butterhead lettuce that thrives in my garden (and in winter, my greenhouse) each year.

- Squash: I've tried many types of summer squash, but I still rely on the old-fashioned *Black Beauty* heritage zucchini. I'm still searching for an all-star winter squash. *Red Kuri* produces flavorful, smooth-fleshed fruit and is incredibly productive – really too vigorous for my small raised beds. If I can find the right place for it, I'll add it to my team again.

- Snow Peas: I've never had much luck growing simple green peas. Several years ago I tried snow peas, and found them to be reliable and productive. I love *Mammoth Melting Snow Peas*; they are the first seeds I put in the ground in early spring, and they produce steadily through summer if I keep the soil and roots cool with mulch.

- I'm not really a flower gardener, but I have three must-have blooms. I intersperse Marigolds and Zinnias among the vegetables, and I put blue-flowered Borage somewhere nearby. All three attract plenty of pollinators while providing bursts of color. Marigolds are also well-known to discourage many plant pests.

I'm still searching for standout performers in several areas (sweet corn, kale, beets, peppers). There have been some successes, but each needs more trials. I'll share my favorite landscape and yard plants in another column.

This is a great time of year to wander outside with your garden journal or a notebook, while this past season is still fresh in your mind. Which varieties struggled with the extreme heat and dry conditions, and which thrived? What produced well and what was disappointing? Note your all-star performers, and think about which positions on your garden team you might want to fill with new players next season.

Laura Huenneke is a plant ecologist and retired university professor who has gardened east of Flagstaff for nearly 20 years. Taking the Master Gardening course tremendously increased her ability to actually grow plants successfully! Sarah Edmonds provided very helpful editing. Gardening Etc. is produced by the Coconino County Master Gardening program of the University of Arizona's Cooperative Extension.