

Taking Stock of the Gardening Year

By Steven Grayson



The decision to use a gauzy frost cloth to keep the lettuce and spinach from bolting during a hot June is one I'll want to remember for next year.

Photo credit: Steven Grayson

Often when you are asked, "How was your summer?", you think back on travel or family or some landmark that made the three sunniest months something to talk about. But what if someone asked you, "How was your garden this year?" What would you say?

It's an important question, and one you should think about now while the memories are still fresh. Did you try out some new seed varieties or even try growing different veggies this year? Can you still find out the name and variety of those cucumbers that did really well or the acorn squash that just didn't seem to like your soil? What veggies or flowers survived the inevitable freak hailstorm in August? What veggies had a bitter taste and what produce, when handed off to neighbors, got the best reviews? What plants were consumed by grasshoppers or roaming mammals and which ones seemed immune to such indignities? Did the irrigation system or periodic watering make for a successful garden or do you need to finally replace those driplines that were clogged beyond repair?

Autumn is the time of year to take stock of what went on in the garden. As you harvest the last of your potatoes or wait with patience for the pumpkins to finally turn golden orange, think back on what produced

and what didn't. How was your timing this year? Did you plant too early and get bitten by that final frost or did you plant too late and not use those frost-free days in May to your advantage?

Gardening in Flagstaff is a combination of betting the farm and hoping your luck holds out. It is also a place where asking your neighbor or friend what worked for them can yield some of the best information you can get. Those comments from your community can be of great help if you remember to write them down.

If you don't already have a map of what was planted where, now is the time to make that map before you start spreading compost and all signs of what once grew where is gone. Take a look at the seed packs or receipts from gardening shops and jot down how well the acquired plants and seeds did. See if you can remember when that hail came down and who survived well or when the rains stopped and you had to start watering again.

My notes from the summer are a scattering of good news and bad. I bragged about the Nantes carrots from Native Seeds/SEARCH that for the second year in a row grew beautifully and tasted sweet. I congratulated myself for moving the strawberries to a much better location that allowed them to thrive. I celebrated the pumpkin plant volunteers that overran the Blanket Flowers and produced unexpected pie pumpkins. I even took credit for the Anaheim peppers that were a late addition but that produced giant peppers while plants on either side of them withered under various insect attacks.

But there were losses as well. I lamented the loss of the eggplant starters that were skeletonized by grasshoppers before they had much of a chance to grow. I cursed myself for once again planting the Tepary beans so close together that they barely had enough room to produce any pods. I swore I wouldn't do it again but I did. Plus, I noticed too late that the waterline that has supported early lettuce and spinach for several years was just not putting out enough water this spring to keep them healthy.

Take pride in the things that grew well and tasted great and maybe figure out a strategy for next year that will compensate for harsh weather or personal habits that don't benefit the garden. Remember that the weather every year is a little different in northern Arizona and being flexible with your gardening practices can make the difference between success and disappointment. Knowing what worked in previous years can get you through a cold summer, an exceptionally hot June, or the fact that you just can't bring yourself to thin as ruthlessly as you should.

Steven Grayson is a former sheep and organic produce farmer and a Coconino County Master Gardener.