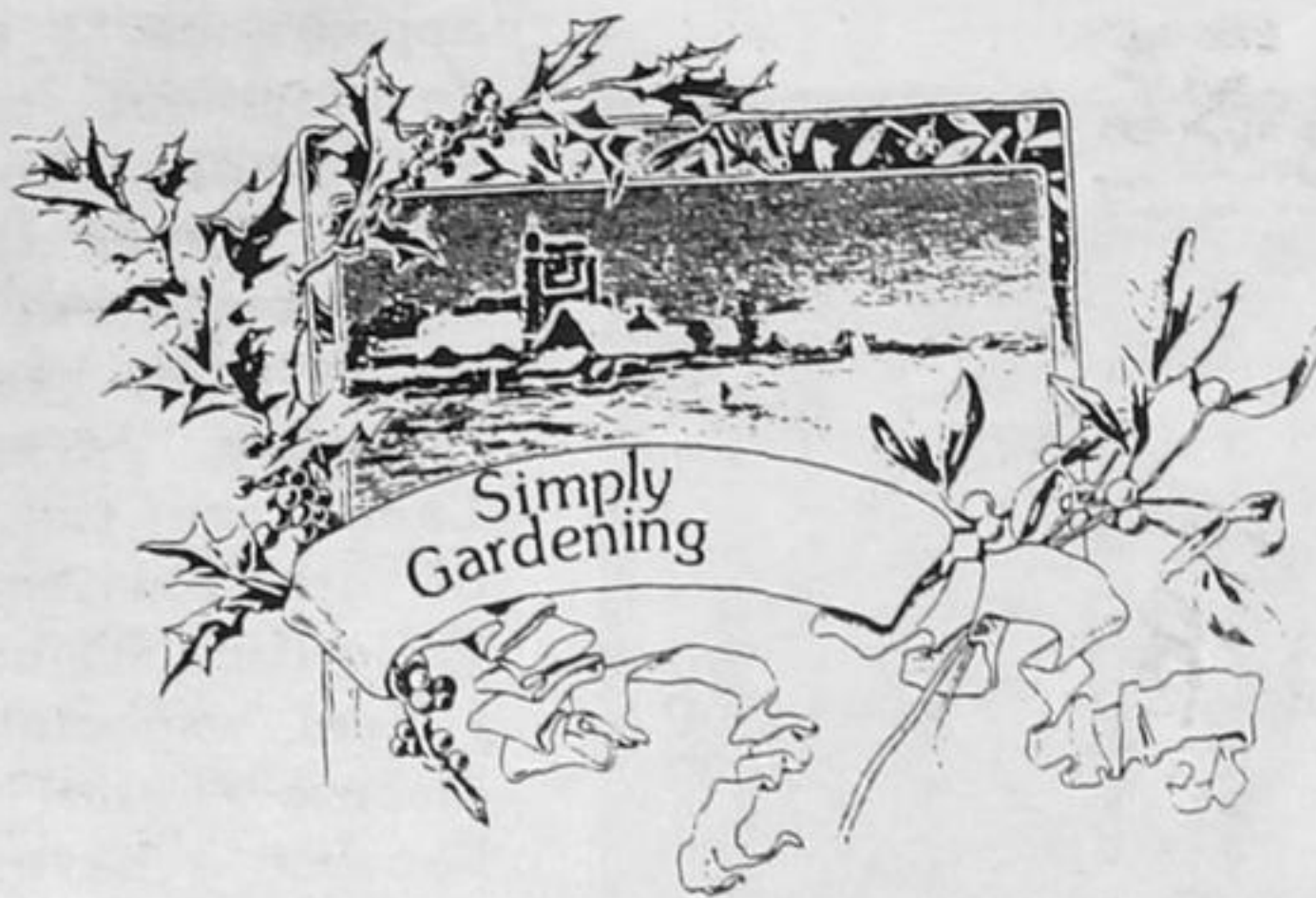


The first week of summer is like growing up; you know a lot of good times are ahead of you but you aren't quite sure when it's all going to start. If I try to beat the season by too much time, I'll pay for it in lost transplants and lowered yields of vegetables and flowers. In this column, I thought I'd pass along a few thoughts on that venerable denizen of the vegetable patch - the humble tomato.

You can argue about how to pronounce the name, but you can not argue that warm soil is critical for the success of the young transplant. Planting the young tomato transplant before the soil is quite warm is just asking to stunt its growth. Rush the season with cabbage, cauliflower and peas, but rush it with tomatoes and you'll pay the price. In our garden, we plant a little later than most because we tend to be busy in the greenhouses, but our tomatoes will be as early as any of our neighbours. We also plant each transplant so that only 6" of the plant is above the soil line; anything below this will root and, by leaving only 6" showing, we are reducing the amount of plant which can be wind burned. We try to plant hardened-off transplants, making sure that the greenhouse has not been heated at night or that the plant has actually spent a few nights outside before we entrust it to the ground. We use 2 tablespoons of bone and blood type fertilizer to every plant (bone and blood meal fertilizers do not burn), applying it around the plant but not directly in the hole or against the tender young stem. Watering the plant 'in' is critical; after the transplant is in the ground, a watering can full of warm water is used to make a real mud bath around the transplant. This reduces large air spaces which could damage roots and which warms up the soil in the vicinity of the transplant. (Do you like your feet cold or warm?) In our garden, we have tried a lot of different staking methods but the one which Andrea likes the best (shows you who takes care of the vegetables at critical times) is the tomato cage system. When installing these around tender transplants, make sure that they are level and equally stuck into the ground. The weight of the average tomato plant can easily topple them in August. You can get more tomatoes into a small garden by using a 1x2 stake but the cages work better in the average size garden. The last thing that we do is actually the first thing we do. We choose good varieties that have performed well for us in our trial gardens. While we grow everything we sell in order to test it, we grow a lot more of our favourite plants. For example, for early tomatoes we prefer Ultra Girl or Ultra Sweet.



For mid season fruit - Celebrity, Ultra Boy (Andrea's favourite) and Floramerica (Doug's favourite) get grown. Canning tomatoes are Andrea's domain and she likes the smaller but less juicy Veeroma variety which is one of the plum shaped Italian tomatoes. I know that every person has his/her own favourite varieties, but these are our picks. We also never plant tomatoes in the same part of our garden two years in a row. The last thing we do may be superstition and it may be fact but we interplant our tomatoes with large Marigolds (a bug repellent) and Basil (a flavour enhancer). In any case, I enjoy a good tomato and I suspect you do as well.

Picking out flower and vegetable transplants can be made a lot more successful if you follow a few simple guidelines. Wherever you get your plants, keep these guidelines in mind. Transplants are usually sold in two pack styles. The older fibre pack and the newer plastic cell pack. If you buy transplants in open packs then you have to be prepared to rip the roots up of plants as you separate them in the pack. The newer cell packs allow you to directly plant each individual plant without tearing roots. This tearing of the roots will set your plant back at least one week in the garden. A plant such as a tomato is not terribly harmed because it has a very active and fast growing root system, but something like a fibrous begonia will not respond very quickly to root trashing. Large knives can be used to cut in between each transplant to make sure each transplant gets its own share of the mingled root ball. If you are buying cell packs, the larger the cell, the faster your plant will establish itself in the garden. Research has shown that the larger the cell, the faster a tomato will bear fruit. Normal bargain basement plants are grown in 72 cell trays (72 plants in a 10"x20" tray). Good plants are grown in 48 cell trays and deluxe plants are grown in 32 cell trays. You can expect to pay a little bit more for better plants but they should survive better for you. The main problem with the 72 cell trays is the lack of care they may get at the retailers - with this small soil size, it is easy to miss watering and then the plant will dry out. This

drying out and reviving may happen several times before you buy the plant and this will stress the plant so that it will not perform as well as you might like it to.

Those concerned with organic or chemical treatment of their vegetable transplants should buy directly from the grower and should ask about the pesticides or fungicides that have been used on the crop. Ask about growth regulants, did the grower use them; if they were used, avoid these plants quickly because they are illegal for use on vegetable plants (but commonly used to keep tomatoes short).

Look under the leaves of plants for aphids or whitefly. While whitefly will disappear very shortly in the normal garden, aphid populations can build up very quickly and can damage plants. Pepper plants are quite susceptible to aphids, so check out the peppers before you buy.

It sounds simple but count each pack to make sure you are getting the right number of plants. It doesn't matter how good the greenhouse or nursery, plants die or are killed by previous customers (you wouldn't believe what some people do to plants in a greenhouse), so count your plants.

Make sure that your petunias and impatiens are still relatively short. Tall gangly plants simply do not do well when transplanted and look stretched out in the garden. While you can bury tomato transplants, it is not a recommended procedure for many flowers. It's easier to make the grower or retailer grow them properly. If you do purchase the basketball player of the petunia market, do not be afraid to cut it off at the waist. This shearing will force the lateral buds to develop and you will, once again, have a bushy plant. Water them in with warm water and they'll love you and bloom for you all summer.

There are a lot of really new and interesting annual flowers on the market now and the following plants are ones that we have trialled and tested in our own gardens and can recommend to you. If you are tired of that old petunia plasticus and impatiens everywhere (us plant people like Latin names), try a few of these varieties this year. An old favourite, Calendula, is making a comeback. At 18" tall and full of stiff aster-like blooms, these plants

make good garden cut flowers. Growing in the full sun, they come in straight colours or a mix of apricot, lemon yellows and other soft shades. The early frost never bothers them and they lasted right until the end of October in our gardens last year.

Calliopsis is a great conversation piece in July as its 30" tall bulk makes a great show of yellow and red in a corner of your sunny garden. Not a great cut flower, it overpowers everything else in the garden with hundreds of blooms on each plant. The only drawback to this plant is that it only blooms for about 6 weeks in the middle of summer. An incredible show while it is doing its thing though.

Mesembryanthemum is a super rock garden annual or a pot type summer bloomer. Its 3" yellow daisy blooms look out of place on its succulent leaves. A short creeper for the full sun, it's worth a try.

Marvel of Peru is a good garden performer for the full sun or light shade. Also known in the past as 4 o'clocks, they open their trumpet-like blooms in the afternoon. Supported on 18" tall plants, ours last summer bloomed continuously from July until frost.

Nemesia is a shady type plant that only gets 8" tall. Normally coming in a mix of pastel oranges and yellows, this plant makes a great window box or patio pot hanger.

Nemophila is another newer plant that also stays short. At 3", it does very well in baskets and pots with its sky blue cup-shaped flowers. It will bloom from June until frost in our gardens.

Ricinus is a conversation piece in the garden. The castor bean will easily hit 8' tall in a sunny location and, with its huge, deeply cut leaves, it will remind you of a tropical jungle. Grown for its foliage, the beans (which have never ripened in our garden) are reputedly poisonous for small children. Frankly, I'm not sure how a small child could get up into this beast of a plant to get at the beans. We had to use an axe to dig ours out two summers ago after the frost had killed the tops.

Safflower is a good cut flower; hitting 32" tall in the full sun, its orange blooms will lighten up any summer bouquet.

Schizanthus is becoming a favourite around our garden. The plant (poor man's orchid) is a vigorous, bushy plant that blooms its head off for 6 weeks in the middle of the summer. Shades of white, lilac, rose, violet, etc., are common in the mix and this sun-lover, rising to its full height of 12", will win your heart too.

There are a few of the newer or renewed annual varieties available at nurseries now. Take advantage of the introduction of these different plants and try something different this year.