

Harvest time and the importance of fall for soil life



By Janet Sellers

Summer is pretty much over, cool nights are here again, and most gardeners are harvesting their last food crops. We gardeners can still try to prolong the harvest and cover any small beds from frost with the protection of garden fabric, plastic sheeting, or just a bed sheet if needed for maybe a few extra weeks of crops.

In this part of the season, it's time to be preparing the soil. And whether one has an established garden or is just contemplating one for next year, we all can jump-start the next season by tilling in fall leaves, grasses, veggie kitchen scraps, manures, etc. into the garden bed.

Some gardens will need these materials tilled into the soil, while the no-till Hugelkulturs and "lazagne" layered materials beds will just be harvested and then rest on their own, since the wood organic layers and nutrients beneath those mounds will supply most of the moisture and soil nutrients to the top next spring.

Many home gardeners reported good yields all season, and this year, the rain surely helped. For the brave ones that planted and protected their gardens in May, there is plenty to harvest even now. Most reports I got were that the cool weather crops thrived in our cool summer weather, and the plants really grew by July from small to large and fruitful in August.

In my case, I had put in started plants and seeds in most of my new Hugelkultur bed by mid-July, and while all the plants are now blooming and thriving, I'll need our season to last much longer to get any harvest from it this year. My other raised bed project at the Monument Community Garden, was planted in June, and now has enough to harvest for greens, herbs, and beany things that will go to Tri-Lakes Cares.

This year we tried the row garden style, and while every bit of the ground and raised beds is full of plants, the actual food harvest is only a fraction of what last year's "square foot companion plant gardening" style provided, inch for inch. A good lesson for small spaces!

Many High Altitude Natural Garden (HANG) gardeners said that their (Hugelkultur, raised and in-ground row garden) heat-loving crops like tomato plants still have just blossoms and green fruit, but I'm told that, if needed, we can easily ripen those green ones in a paper bag on the countertop. Either that, or I'll have to look for green tomato recipes!

Speaking of HANG style harvesting, our local organic hops farm, The Twisted Bine, Rick and Leah Squires' farm, harvested hops by cutting down the aerial hops bine ropes at the end of August to provide Front Range breweries with fresh hops for the Sept. 20 beer festival at Limbach Park in Monument. Each portion of the harvest had to go to the brewers on a tight schedule for fresh delivery,

but the fact that each brewery took care of the picking and immediate use of the crop was a distinct help for the farm's harvest season.

Squires' entire 2014 crop was sold to 10 Front Range breweries for a fresh hop beer competition. The Bines and Brews Hopsfest will have food, fun and beverages. Tickets are limited to 350 people (this ensures patrons won't have long lines and short samples), and "designated driver" tickets are available at the Tri-Lakes Chamber of Commerce, 300 Highway 105, Monument.

The organic hop field soil is turned and natural compost amended each year, and these perennials are put to rest in place each fall. Many home brewers grow hops as a fun ornamental bine, and established bines can begin their new season even as snow is on the ground to start their upward climb. Some gardeners use the paper rope method; some have them on a veranda or sunny wall.

Summer garden tours with the Tri-Lakes Garden Community (TLGC) were held at least once each month, including a hike through the local woods for edible plants, and there is likely to be a harvest potluck with seed exchange coming up. Check the Facebook page for details and year-round tips: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Tri-Lakes-Garden-Community/1386155058330111>.

Needless to say, I'll plant my indoor seedlings in March and put them out with the seeds under covers as early as possible next year, at least by May, and let the seedlings and seeds decide when to get growing. An organic garden has a kind of weather-sense, and it can grow

along with the weather. Many lab chemical-based nutrients just signal the plant to "go" regardless of weather, the plants don't relate to the changes of temperature as well, and may not recognize any upcoming late freeze.

Janet Sellers is an avid novice HANG gardener in the Tri-Lakes area. Contact her with your tips and questions for the TLGC at janetsellers@OCN.me.

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Above: Rick Squires, owner of The Twisted Bine organic hops yard, cuts down the aerially roped hops bines at the end of August to provide Front Range breweries with fresh hops for the Sept. 20 Bines and Brews Hopsfest beer festival at Limbach Park in Monument. The competition includes a "Top Hop" traveling trophy, and the Hopsfest ticket proceeds support Tri-Lakes Health Advocacy and the Tri-Lakes Chamber. Photo by Janet Sellers.

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