

## The High Desert Organic Gardener

Robert Kerekes

As a community service organization the Antelope Acres Town Council is committed to local sustainable family farms for local consumption. To that goal we do all we can to encourage as many people as possible, for their own health, to grow organically at home. We also try to encourage, assist, in the creation of farmers markets and to help develop locally sustainable farming.

We have a Farmers Market Committee that is currently dormant in need of volunteers to help get farmers markets off and running. Without volunteers we can accomplish nothing so if anyone wants to work towards any of these goals please come forward.

One problem with farmers markets here in LA County is the difficulty of establishing one and keeping it running. The County claims to have streamlined the process and yet it is still difficult especially where a small home gardener would have a bumper crop of something but can't head to the local farmers market and sell his limited crop.

The other side of it is the County treats farmers markets too much like a business based on a business model. While it is a business it is a small business. Due to the limited income the County should treat farmers markets more as a community service and less as a business.

One of the first things to do would be to engage the County to help reduce some of the current requirements. At the same time a farmers market could get under way but it takes volunteers to get the work done.

## April/May Gardening

Please note that my advice for time of planting relates to where I live, on the Valley desert floor where it can get very windy and where my temperature extremes are sometimes greater than, say Quartz Hill. So some adjustments need to be made. For the mountain areas, again, more adjustments need to be made.

Timing of planting, starting plants, is very important. We have an extreme climate both in the temperature differences of winter and summer but also of the large swings of temperature between day and night. These conditions cause us to have four very distinct seasons that are short. The reason the seasons are short is because of the rapidness of the temperature changes. For instance peas are a cold to cool weather plant. They cannot tolerate heat. If planted too late for spring planting they then come into production when the

heat hits and they die. I plant them during the first week of February and just make it in time. Planting later would not give the plants enough time to mature. Choice of variety is also important as there are varying times to reach maturity. For instance I plant snap peas, which have a relatively long maturity time for peas. If I were to plant regular shelling peas, or edible pod peas, the maturity time would be shorter.

We are moving into warm to hot weather planting of which most of the plants cannot take freezes and this is particularly true of everyone's favorite, tomatoes. To that point when to plant is very important; too soon and an overnight frost will kill tomato plants, as well as peppers and eggplants, all of which are related.

In the past the for sure safe time of planting frost sensitive plants was mid-May. It is common for the early part of May to be windy and cold with occasional frost very early in the morning. But the weather is changing and as a gardener/farmer it is very important to pay attention to those changes and adjust.

Three years ago the last frost was April 29th and the temperature dropped to 29 degrees. I had a few tomato plants out and they died. But of course I had backup. Our winters are tending towards warmth with less and less frost days and a shortening of winter. But extremes are also common. Plants are blossoming sooner, like lilac, which started growing leaves in mid-winter. Fruit trees are particularly sensitive to temperatures and are blossoming way too early, yet last year we had no late frosts here so the fruit trees did great. Bounty crop of apricots.

Of course tomatoes, peppers and eggplants are transplanted into the garden but started from seed, indoors, from mid-February to late March.

This year I will be putting out some tomatoes sometime in mid-April, according to how the weather looks, then again towards the end of April beginning of May and still have more plants for later, if needed.

Heirloom tomatoes are difficult to grow here due to the heat. Most tomato plants stop fertilization when the temperature reaches into the nineties. What does well here are tomato plants with very short growing seasons and the skins are thick, tough and they have resistance to many diseases. Everyone likes to stake their tomato plants. Don't do it. Let them expand over the ground. The reason is that the micro climate within and under the plants stays cooler and damper. While some tomatoes will sit on the ground, rot and become fodder for sow bugs consider them a sacrifice to nature as the overall production will be better. I pick and throw the damaged tomatoes to my poultry, so nothing gets lost, and the poultry love tomatoes and have many disputes over them.

I grow three varieties of tomatoes. Gold Nuggets, an orange colored cherry tomato very compact but produces prodigious quantities of fruit and will fertilize even when the temperature is over one hundred. A remarkable and very reliable plant. I have a very compact red tomato that I have developed over some years and I call it Kerekes. And then I grow one rambling heirloom, Cherokee Purple, for which the fruit is worth the trouble.

Eggplants are hardier than tomato plants in general. I have grown many varieties with much success but the one I now use was originally a hybrid that I grew seed from successful generations over a few years and now have a fairly stable plant that takes the heat very well and produces large fruits. I call it High Desert.

Eggplant is very versatile and may be used in many ways but takes time to learn. Wife Robin has become very adept at using eggplant all year round. As a former teacher she could produce great classes on food preservation. Everyone thinks of canning first, and foremost, for preservation. Not Robin. She prefers drying and freezing. I would like to add fermentation, something that was common throughout the history of humanity, but is, in general, greatly reduced today.

With the loss of fermented foods the primary source of probiotics was lost. Huge loss. Instead of reversing the trend and returning to the process of fermentation we have probiotics in a pill. How American. Got to swallow a lot of pills to equal the quantity of probiotics in fermented foods.

Peppers are the hardiest, most doing very well in heat. The hotter the pepper, in general, the hardier the plant. Peppers do better supported in cages or staked. The stems are brittle and break easily.

Keep tuned for more information on organic gardening throughout the year.

If we had enough community interest the Town Council would offer organic gardening and food processing classes. For anyone with such interests please let us know.