

Diggin' in the Dirt: The Demise of the Yellow Jackets

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- Columbia County

For last minute food preservation questions, you can call our local OSU Extension office at 503-397-3462 to get answers and to get your pressure canner tested. In addition, there are a number of great OSU publications on food preservation free for the download at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/> and then click on "nutrition and foods."

Fall Topics:

Demise of the yellow jackets

Fall is not a good time to be a yellow jacket worker. The colony is in transition and will soon collapse. A protected class of females ("queens to be") is fattened up since they alone will carry the colonial genes through the winter. They emerge from the colony, mate in air with the males, and then seek a protected place to winter over. It isn't uncommon to find these fat queens in stacks of firewood or under boards in an open garage. Next year, they start a new nest by themselves, tending the larval brood until enough workers are present to take over.

The males, after the reproductive dance is done, quickly fall to earth and perish. The worker caste goes through a slow decline. Early in the year, they fed the new yellow jacket larva pro-

tein from caterpillar juicy bits and the larva, in return, made them sugary treats. But the queen produces fewer larvae towards the end and the workers turn to sugar-rich fruits outside. The colony is in a death spiral. The workers eventually start departing the nest one by one, never to return. The queen for this year also departs to die alone and untended. The remaining larva die as the nest is destroyed by rain and wind and sometimes, skunks who relish brood.

Storing garden produce

The wonderful sunny days in September gave a great boost to our gardens. Now the weather has turned.

Many vegetables will last for some months if stored properly. Advice common to all fruits and vegetables is to only store produce that is in good condition ("one rotten apple can spoil the box"). In addition, check periodically to see if sprouting or rot has developed after initial storage. Finally, freeze or can produce where that makes sense. I covered potatoes in detail in the last column. Here are some tips on other storable vegetables:

Onions and garlic: Hard, pungent onions store the best. If they are still in the ground, dig them now and bring them under cover to cure. Remove the roots. Some gardeners keep the tops on for a while as the onions dry. The onion tops should be removed when the bulbs are bagged for final storage unless you are braiding them.

Onions and garlic both need to be stored in dry conditions. Some out-

buildings are too moist in the fall/winter and in those conditions, onions and garlic will start to sprout. You will have better luck storing them in a warm, dry room inside. If your garage or outbuilding is dry, that area will be fine. Onions last nicely in paper bags. Some air circulation is important, as is darkness. Sweet onions (Walla Walla types and others) should be eaten right away as they have very poor storage ability. Look through your onions and garlic often to remove bulbs that start to sprout or decay. A well-cured pungent onion should last at least four months in a proper storage. Garlic can last until late spring or even longer.

Winter squash: Winter squashes are also easy to store. Harvest them before a frost. When rainy weather sets in, squash are done growing and will only rot if left outside. Butternut and Hubbard squash store for six months or more if well-cured. Acorn squash are best used within four months of harvest.

Clip the squash from the vine leaving a stem end. Wash the dirt from the squash and let them cure in a warm room on a counter or table for a week. Check for any signs of rot. Then put them into a dry room on a shelf or a shallow box. Best storage temperature is about sixty degrees. Check periodically for decay.

Other root crops: Carrots, parsnips, and beets develop better flavor if left in the ground until a frost. However, if the meadow mice find them, all you will have are carrot/parsnip/beet stubs with cute little teeth marks. In addition, if you had problems with the carrot rust fly (also a problem on parsnips but not

beets), their tunnels will decay faster if the carrots are left in the ground. The roots are best stored like potatoes in sawdust in the dark. Horseradish can be left in the ground to be dug and grated later. The roots develop greater pungency when it gets colder. Mice don't seem to like them.

Share your extra fruit and vegetables with the Food Bank. What you can offer is really important.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called County Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call 503 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Contact information for the Extension office

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