

Diggin' in the Dirt: Squash and Cucumber Comments

By Chip Bubl
Oregon State University
Extension Service - Columbia County

Food preservation and food safety

Want to learn how to safely preserve produce from your garden this summer? The OSU Extension Service in Columbia County offers food preservation information and resources. Here is a list of services that we provide:

- Free Printed Publications and Safe Canning Recipes
- Online Publications and Recipes: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/food-preservation>

- Free Pressure Canner Gauge Testing (call ahead before bringing in your gauge)

- Direct assistance from the Extension office in St. Helens. Call 503 397-3462

- Food Preservation and Food Safety Hotline from July 14 through October 17, 2014, 9 am – 4 pm Monday- Friday. 1-800-354-7319

- A list of our hands-on canning classes can be found on our website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> or call our office at 503 397-3462

Squash and cucumber comments

Most gardeners have lots of winter squash. Varieties such as Acorn, Buttercup, Butternut, and Hubbard (to name a few) will store well for at least four months. Harvesting the oldest squash can start now. Clip the squash from the vine leaving a couple inches of

stem except with Hubbard squash which store best with the stems removed. Wash squash with a mix of one part bleach to nine parts water, dry it off, and leave it in a room that is very dry for about two weeks. This will form a hard shell on the squash that will make it more resistant to storage diseases. Then put it in a dry garage or basement for long-term storage. Check the squash periodically to remove those showing any signs of rot. Keep the mice away.

You can hold off harvesting the remaining squash while we have nice weather. But if we head toward an extended rainy cycle, harvest the squash before the rain starts so they won't rot on the vine. Temperatures consistently below 50 degrees also reduce storage time. Freezing temperatures injure squash and cause decay. The Vernonia area usually gets a first fall frost around the first week in October but it can come sooner. If the vine is consumed with powdery mildew, the squash aren't going to grow well anyway, so get them out of the garden and into storage.

Powdery mildew is a fungus favored by warm, humid weather and early morning dew. I get a lot of calls about powdery mildew on squash and cucumbers. What gardeners discovered this year is that some squash got it and other varieties didn't. Varieties have been bred to be mildew resistant but are not always sought out by gardeners or growers of transplants. Next year, examine the seed catalogs for versions of your favorite squash and cucumbers that have powdery mildew resistance. Sulfur

dusts and sprays can be used effectively if applied before the disease is really rolling. Some recent research indicated that milk sprays (1 part milk to 9 parts water) may help with the disease, again with a spray program started before the disease shows up, usually near the end of June at the latest. Another squash disease, angular leaf spot, can also be somewhat managed with resistant varieties.

I have had a number of calls about bitter cucumbers. There are several factors that influence whether a cucumber will be bitter. First is breeding. The pickling lines are generally bitterer if eaten fresh than the slicing varieties. The bitter flavor disappears when they are pickled. Stress accounts for the bulk of bitter complaints. For a cucumber, stress can be low temperatures, drought stress when it gets hot, or an attack of powdery mildew. Cucumbers from the same plant can be bitter one week and ones that ripen the following week or so may be fine. The bitter flavor is concentrated on the stem end and in or just under the peel.

Produce storage tips

Despite what you read in books, carrots often don't store well in the ground for several reasons. First, we have a nasty little fly called the carrot maggot whose larva burrow into the carrot, leaving holes that will rot. The maggot continues to work during this time so carrots left in the ground after they are ready may still be affected. Second, many gardeners have populations of meadow mice, more properly known as voles. They use mole or their own runways to wander around the garden and if they chance on carrots, beets, or potatoes, they start gnawing. It isn't nice to pull up your carrots and find only a stub remains. The rodent teeth marks are usually easy to see.

Do not store potatoes or carrots near onions or apples. Both apples and onions give off ethylene gas as which can cause potatoes to sprout and a bitter compound to form in both potatoes and carrots. A truck driver once put a box of

apples in his refrigerated trailer with a load of carrots and headed to the east coast. All the carrots were bitter by the time he got there.

Basil nearing the end

This has been a generally good year for heat-loving crops. Tomatoes, peppers and squash have flourished if given enough water. Basil has also done well. We have harvested many cuttings of basil for making pesto (a garlic/basil/pine nut/parmesan/olive oil wonder sauce) which we freeze in ice cube trays. We then package the cubes into freezer bags for winter use. Heavenly. But basil does not tolerate cooler weather. It starts looking ratty when we get temperatures in the low 40 degree range and starts turning brown around 37 degrees. So get clipping and preserve some of this plant for winter use.

Donate extra produce to the food bank, senior center, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

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

Oregon State University Extension Service – Columbia County
505 N. Columbia River Highway (across from the Legacy clinic)
St. Helens, OR 97051
503 397-3462
Email: chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu



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Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday.
Our next issue will be out October 2nd.

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