

Diggin' in the Dirt: Gardens in an Emergency

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Beginning beekeeping class

There will be a class for people interested in beekeeping or novice beekeepers on Wednesday, June 22nd from 6:30pm-8:30pm at the OSU Extension office in St. Helens. The class is free and open to all. Space is limited to 40 people. Please call us if you have any questions: (503) 397-3462.

Gardens in an Emergency

I recently participated in a disaster planning event in St. Helens. Vernonia has had a lot of practice in this regard between the 1996 and 2007 floods, the 2008 Christmas Eve snow storm, and various wind events. An active gardening community can't be expected to provide food for all but can be a significant resource for the kinds of foods that won't be shipped into an area, such as vegetables and fruit, in the initial recovery process. I prepared the following piece for distribution at the Extension office booth that we staffed at the Emergency Preparedness Fair:

Food may be in short supply in a major emergency like an earthquake, forest fire situation, heavy winter flood, wind, or snow storm, etc. Food that you have grown, collected, and/or hunted and fished and prepared for longer term storage can play an important role in the quality of your diet and your health during the emergency.

Many vegetables can be start-

ed as early as February and continue to be planted until late August for later harvest through the winter and into the following spring. Fruit trees and small fruits like blue berries, blackberry types, grapes, and currants/gooseberries can be a great addition to any emergency food planning.

In an emergency in the summer, there is plenty of sunlight and warm temperatures but little or no rain so water sources and thoughtful management of what water you have is important for a summer garden when electricity and pumping infrastructures are damaged. If you develop a garden that has been enriched with lots of compost over the years, it will hold more water in the top and sub soil. It also encourages deeper rooting allowing you to grow some vegetables with far less water than normal. Active weed control (weeds remove soil moisture and shade desirable seedlings) and mulching will also help your vegetables to survive on far less water.

Plants suited to summer gardening with little or no water after they get established (this doesn't always work): tomatoes, peppers, some winter squash, and possibly some lettuce varieties, kale, and arugula.

Irrigation water is not an issue in a Vernonia winter. But cold, short days with far less light slows plant growth.

Winter gardens have to be planted by mid-August and well established by late September to be productive in the depths of winter.

Plants well suited to winter gardens: Swiss chard, kale, arugula, leeks,

and some other cabbage family greens can be grown outside with only a little protection with row covers on the coldest days. Lettuce, in particular can be grown in a cold frame or greenhouse most of the winter and outside until the first autumn 28 degree frost. Carrots, turnips, parsnips, beets, and rutabagas can be stored in the ground until needed through about February (some turn bitter and degrade rapidly in quality in the ground after that) if you have no field mice that would eat them. If you do, these crops need to be harvested and stored in an unheated garage or shed in sawdust in bins.

Crops for winter fresh storage: The root crops noted above plus winter squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, garlic, apples, pears, and quince. Check periodically for decay.

Crops for drying: Tomatoes, peppers, kale, shell beans, apples, pears, cherries, etc. You will need a food dehydrator to get the food quite dry so it won't mold in plastic storage bags on a shelf in your pantry or freezer.

Crops for water bath (high acid) canning: Tomatoes only (**without other vegetables in the mix**), cucumber pickles, pickled green beans, fruit preserves, jams, and sauces. Filled jars should be packed back in the boxes they came in with the cardboard dividers to keep them from breaking. Some people store these boxes under their beds.

If you pressure can, there are a lot more foods that can be kept in good condition for years. Be sure to follow all the up-to-date pressure canning recommendations (see below) and have your pressure gauge tested periodically. We do that here at the Extension office.

There are staples that you probably can't grow/hunt/forage or catch enough of (or are cheaper to buy) but which you need to have at least a 30 day supply on hand include protein sources like canned tuna fish and dry beans, some oils for cooking and salads, and carbohydrate sources like sugar, honey, and flour, and finally, salt, and brown rice. It never hurts to have some chocolate. Many herbs like rosemary, bay leaves, sage, and thyme can be grown with little or no water in the summer and can be harvested directly from the plant all winter long. You can dry all these herbs as well. You can best capture the flavors of some herbs in vinegar (tarragon is an example of an herb that loses most of its flavor dried but makes a nice

flavored vinegar). Other staples might include tea or coffee and perhaps some wine or beer (home brewers might find themselves very popular in a food emergency).

Food Safety or Food Preservation Questions? OSU Extension Service Has Answers.

Are you planning to preserve food from your garden or purchased from a farm this summer? If so, call or visit the OSU Extension Service office **before** you start canning, freezing, or drying. Costly and potentially harmful mistakes can be made by using outdated canning recipes and instructions. You can find free publications at the Columbia County Extension office located at 505 N. Columbia River Highway in St. Helens (across from the Legacy Clinic). If you have questions, phone the office at (503) 397-3462. You can download for free all our food preservation publications at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/food-preservation>. An additional great resource is the National Center for home Food Preservation at <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/>.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, 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 sign up for email notification of when to find the latest edition on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/>.

Contact information for the Extension office

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FOR TOWING EMERGENCIES IN AND AROUND THE VERNONIA AREA

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