

Diggin' in the Dirt: Baby Bees at Play

By Chip Bubl
Oregon State University Extension
Service – Columbia County

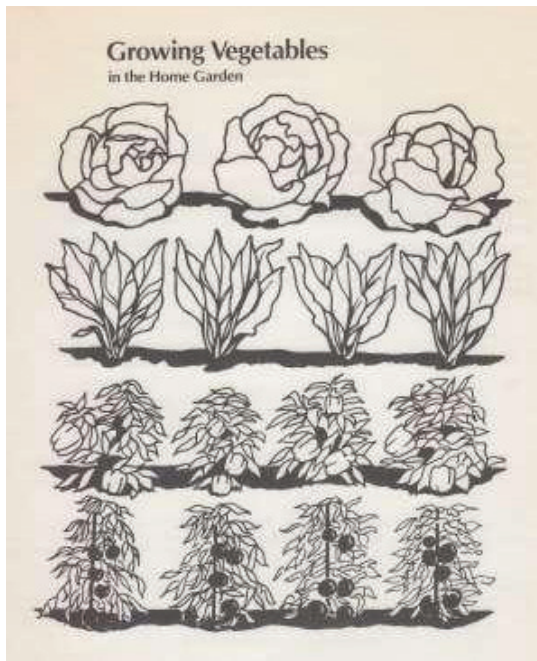
Vegetable seeds in 2021

The Pandemic has taught us a lot but at a terrific cost in lives and economic stability. When the first shutdown came in mid-March, there was panic buying of staples like toilet paper, flour, sugar, meat, and beans. Soon it became clear that supply chains for almost everything that wasn't digital were under stress. Meat prices spiked as packing plants slowed or had to close as their labor force got COVID. In response, farmers killed hogs and chickens because they couldn't sell them and they cost too much to feed.

By early April, people started to become seriously concerned about food. Many decided that, with more time on their hands and room for a garden, this was the year to get serious about home grown and preserved food. Almost overnight, vegetable seeds disappeared from most stores. The stores found that they couldn't restock because there were more important items to be transported. That amplified the perception that this was a serious crisis. Vegetable starts disappeared equally fast. And again, nursery businesses were unable to get more seeds to quickly grow extra starts.

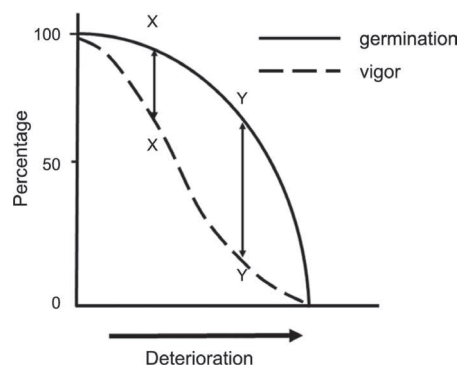
But eventually many gardens got planted. It turned out to be a relatively good gardening year. Parts of May and early June were cooler than was good for peppers and tomatoes but ultimately, harvests were abundant.

So, what about seed supply for 2021? After talking to people in the vegetable seed industry, seed should be more plentiful this year. Transportation infrastructure is back up. The U.S. Postal Service is rapidly recovering from the holiday rush. That said, ordering seed early will ensure you get your first choice of the vegetable varieties



you want. There is, again, evidence that seed stock are being rapidly depleted. Seed catalogs for 2021 are out. Almost all are online. It is time to think about what you want to grow more of or less of and what new crops and/or varieties you might like to try.

If you have seed left over from last year, put them in the refrigerator (in a tightly closed container so they stay really dry) or freezer. That will prolong their value by slowing their loss of vigor. But don't use seed that is more than two years old if it hasn't been stored cold and dry. It may germinate but the vigor of the seedling won't be as good as it should be. The chart shows how vigor of the seedling decreases faster than the germination percentage of the seed.



You might think about saving some seeds from your 2021 garden. Tomatoes, peppers, green beans, peas, and lettuce are easy to save, assuming that the variety you grew wasn't a hybrid (check the seed packet or go online to be sure). Chard, beets, and spinach can be saved if they aren't blooming at the same time. The cabbage family is a challenge since many types can readily cross with each other. Same with winter squash. But if you do get in the seed saving mode and there was another seed shortage, you would at least have the basics of a good garden already.

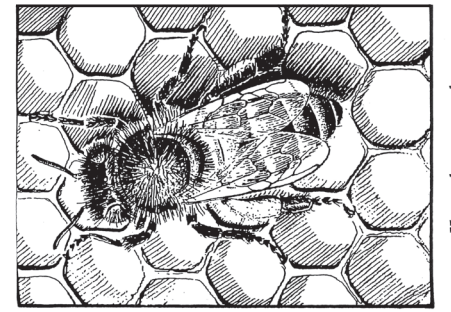
George Washington, Composter in Chief

Many of our first political leaders came from an agrarian background. They were inveterate experimenters, the agricultural scientists of their day. President Jefferson was well-known for his

farm innovations.

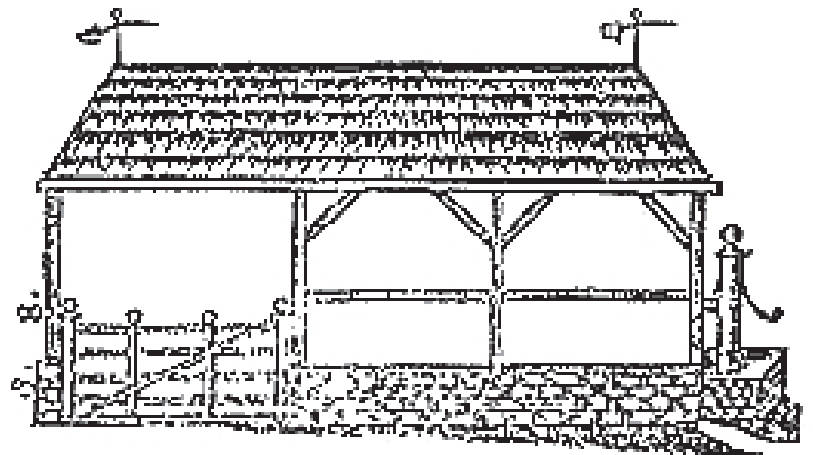
Washington also had a lively interest in farm improvements. He raised a range of crops on thin Virginia soil and was painfully aware of the impact that farming practices of his day had on soil structure and productivity.

He believed that for farmers to prosper, they had to return nutrients to the soil. He added, at various times, fish heads, plaster of Paris, creek mud, and manure to his land. There is written and archeological evidence that Washington built a large structure to compost manure and crop residues prior to adding it back to the land. The building, called the "dung repository" featured masonry sides, a rammed earth and cobble floor to hold the liquid fraction, and a roof supported by posts. While there was little information on what was actually composted, Wash-



Honey bee on comb.

A researcher back east attached tiny transponders to record the flights of young bees. She noted the pathway and time of each flight. She found that young bees view the hive and the landscape features from different points on successive flights. As they learned more they flew further and faster. Some bees made 18 orientation flights. She noted that it is amazing that they can find their way in the world from distances up to seven miles from the nest. And all this with brains the size of grass seeds!



ington wrote these instructions: "Let others rake and scrap up all the trash, of every sort and kind about the houses... and throw it (all I mean that will make dung) into the Stercorary." Since most of what was around the houses then was of organic or mineral origin, it was probably largely compostable. The last term was his name for the structure. Inspiring advice from one of the founding fathers, though not widely quoted. This article was inspired by a brief piece I read years ago in the "City Farmer" which is still in business <https://cityfarmer.info/urban-farm-magazine/> and here is the original article: <https://cityfarmer.org/washington.html>.

Bees at play

Bees are a delight to scientists since they exhibit complex social behaviors but are rather easy to study. A question left unanswered by the great bee student Karl von Frisch was how bees locate the landmarks that guide their foraging behavior. Bees engage in "play flights" as youngsters. On a bright, sunny day, bunches of young bees burst from the hive all at once and turn around to look at the hive. They return after a short time, buzzing around the nest. Think about it. Before the "baby" bees came out all they knew was the darkness of the nest!

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Free newsletter (what a deal!)

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 or emailed 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.

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.

Contact information for the Extension office

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

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