

NEWS RELEASE
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VEGETABLE GARDEN “KEY”

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

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The “key” to a successful, productive, vegetable garden is quite simple. The variety and quality of the plants used is important, but actually not critical. Many common vegetable types grow just fine in Mariposa. Even stressed transplants, given a little time, will usually turn out plenty of tasty produce. Type and amount of fertilizer, other than over-fertilizing, is also not critical, if the “key” is used. The nutrient most commonly in short supply in our county is nitrogen. Compost, commercial fertilizer or even expensive proprietary blends all get converted eventually to forms of nitrogen usable by plants, even in our foothill soils. Irrigation methods are important, but again, not the “key.” Once established, most gardens should do well with a thorough weekly irrigation. If the plants need more frequent irrigation not to wilt, they are probably missing the “key.” Thorough means applying enough water to moisten the entire root zone, about 8 to 12 inches for most vegetables. Five minutes standing over the garden with a hose does not get the water deep enough. Either plan on standing there longer, or invest in a simple drip-irrigation system. It takes 20-50 minutes of slow water application to get the entire root zone wetted properly. Frequent (more often than every 3 or 4 days), shallow (less than 10 minutes) watering is a common mistake and counter-productive to a healthy vegetable garden. Improper watering often results in shallow, poorly formed root systems more prone to disease and not conducive to a healthy plant.

Now to the “key” – Organic Matter (OM). Adding plenty of compost, wood chips, or anything from decomposed plants will result in the most productive gardens. OM improves water penetration, soil aeration, and root development and even helps in disease prevention. Conventional wisdom, often incorrect, cautions against using pine or walnut or a wide variety of other plant materials. Our research shows that, properly composted, most plant material can successfully be used in gardens. Soil pH (acidity) is not significantly affected by any plant, including pine. Even reported toxins, such as in oleander, once composted, do not pose a problem in garden soil.

In following this recommendation, remember to add plenty. To properly amend six inches of either clay or decomposed granite Mariposa-type soils required six inches of organic matter, well mixed. Not only will the plants do well in general, but useful nitrogen will be slowly supplied, aeration improved, water will more easily penetrate soil deeper, a balanced microbial climate can develop, and, to me, it smells good.

If all this good advice might result in bumper crops, we have help. Our UCCE specialists in home canning are offering a workshop April 22 in Mariposa County. Call the UCCE office, 966-2417, for registration information, or visit our website at [Http://cemariposa.ucdavis.edu](http://cemariposa.ucdavis.edu). We also have a free leaflet on composting available and related articles on our website.

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