

May Flies for Gardeners

Written by Jeff Poppens
Tuesday, June 12, 2012

May flies by for gardeners. Between planting summer vegetables and hoeing what's already growing, there is hardly time to pick a salad. But our tiny plants from early May become thousands of lettuce heads by Memorial Day, and everyone must do their part and eat their greens.

We only hoed them once. Dry weather kept the weeds from sprouting, and good soil management insured plenty of moisture for the lettuce roots. I picture a giant sponge underneath our fields, capable of soaking in the winter and spring rains and slowly releasing water to the crops in the summer. Deciding to not hoe it again has now brought up weeds, but the lettuce has made heads and so this field will be plowed and replanted anyways.

There was plenty of hoeing to do elsewhere. Beans, cucumbers and squash plantings have been hoed and thinned. Soil gets pulled in to help hill crops. Potatoes get hilled with disc hillers on the farmall tractor, and this is also how we make the ridges for sweet potatoes. We'll use them for the last pass through the corn, too.

Beets, onions and carrots don't want to be hilled. They would rather have their shoulders coming out of the ground. Swiss Chard, celery and parsley like the soil neither higher or lower, although celery can be blanched by mulching deeply.

I'm trying parsnips again, but planting later than I have before. They germinate slowly and often get lost in spring weeds. Planting them in early May got us a good stand, but they still required a lot of tedious hand work.

Several bushels of butternuts were split, yielding a few pounds of seeds to plant about an acre. They would have been easier to plant if they weren't so sticky. Next year I'll try and get the seeds out and dried a few days before sowing.

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We rolled out our groundcloth for melons. A dozen seeds go into each freshly worked hill, and later thinned to two. A local sawmill donated slab wood to hold the cloth down, and will be remembered come harvest.

Second plantings of beans, summer squash and cucumbers separate the melons from the tomato patch. We have a row of dill in the center to break up the tomato jungle soon to form. We dug holes four feet apart and poured a half gallon of water in the hole. Then we take our bare root transplants from the cold frames and lay them in the row, roots in mud and stem in furrow, and rake in dry dirt over them. Just the top six inches bends up out of the ground.

Peppers are planted three feet apart, and eggplants slightly closer. Sweet potatoes are spaced at 16 inches. One person lays a plant down and the partner pushes it in with a stick. The stick has a 16" wire on it, to mark the spot where the next plant goes. Processes like this allow us to move down the row quickly, with less bending over and less decision making.

Flowers get planted on the edges of the fields or on the ends of the rows. I like cosmos and sunflowers for a tall border, and zinnias and marigolds for a shorter one. Tithonia, or Mexican Sunflower, makes a great accent for special places with its velvet stems and bright orange blooms. White flowered buckwheat is sown wherever we need a temporary ground cover.

As we enter June, the potatoes are laid by and the garlic is topped and soon to be dug. Most fields are planted, but a pumpkin patch is still in the seed jar. Hoeing and harvesting are the daily chores, along with weekly haying. We are also clearing brush from along the power lines on our farm, something I highly recommend everyone do.