

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

What I learned on my summer vacation

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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Interesting summer, hum—but what “vacation”? I have been furiously gardening all summer. The cool spring gave most gardeners a thick, luscious, abundant yard. That is the good and fun part. I spent most of my gardening time removing the too-many leaves on everything, including, well, everything.

At the beginning of the planting season, night invaders made lace of the leaves of eggplants, sunflowers, basil, roses, cucumbers, zinnias, and amaranths. This was a freaking scary mess. I really thought my summer garden was doomed to become “arsenic and old lace.”

Turns out I was not the only victim. Other “insane” gardeners in my repertoire of fellow insane gardeners bellyached the same distress. In despair, I covered plants with an anti-bug cloth, used diatomaceous earth, made night-time flashlight visits, and put out ugly signs with mean words. For a while, nothing really helped much, except for time.

Everything I was doing eventually added up to survival, especially after very light feedings of fish fertilizer. This tactic was to strengthen plants, thus encouraging them to fight their own battles. It worked. The plants rallied, got a wee bit stronger and bigger every day, eventually producing bumper crops. Turns out the flying “martians” prefer just the young and the tender.

This summer was clearly an experience in big container gardening, but also in new and unexplained surprises.

I learned what not to plant in containers. Eggplants planted in old wheelbarrels and galvanized tubs were fantastic and undemanding. My tomatoes did great planted in sewer pipes. Will do that

again. Vining squashes may be happy and healthy and look ravishing in galvanized containers—but who trips on them as soon as they reach ground? One guess.

plants in big galvanized tubs do look way cool. Maybe better yet, will plant all future big trailing plants like squash, watermelon, and pumpkins at the grocery store. Ha, ha, ha.

Here is what I learned: compost, compost, compost. Add organic amendments to the rock-hard ground. I did a multitude of interventions with excellent results. In my gardener’s brain, “organic” amendments include coffee grounds, egg shells, any kind of nut shells (unsalted please), old chicken litter, old manure, straw, etc. I did everything. Result: happy draining soil.

I did learn that if I water raspberries less than expected, they are far sweeter, as water did not “dilute” the flavor. I did learn, according to a good friend, gophers can earn a doctorate degree in the art of escape. This degree is awarded only after escaping from Juicy Fruit gum, gasoline, water, sulphur, smoke bomb, flares, poison, car exhaust, and moth balls.

Forgotten lesson: Tomatoes really do not like it that hot: “Tomatoes grow best when the daytime temperature is between 65 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. They stop growing above 95 degrees Fahrenheit. If nighttime temperatures are above 85 degrees Fahrenheit, the fruit will not turn red” (home.

howstuffworks.com/tomatoes).

Another great lesson I did take to heart is the gratitude shown by my lovely roses just for my feeding and watering them.

“My green thumb came only as a result of the mistakes I made while learning to see things from the plant’s point of view” (H. Fred Dale).

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Eggplants thrive in an old wheelbarrow. Photo: Sioux Rogers.

Growing vegetables in large rusty metal containers looks great, is fun, saves garden space, and makes them easy to individually feed. That is the good part. The “bad” (but not really awful) part is the need to water more frequently as the soil dries up quicker when containers are placed above ground.

So what did I learn? Simple, don’t plant trailing squashes in containers next year. It was too messy. It was way more work than I imagined. Dang all that, because hunky

Here is a very weird summer happening. The soil in my garden became hard as stone. The soil was so hard that water bounced off the ground, getting me wet instead. I heard the same lament from fellow gardeners. What the heck? I take good care of my soil. It is the entire basis of a healthy garden. My potato plants usually grow in loose soil dug up at harvest time with bare hands.

howstuffworks.com/tomatoes).



A night-time insect made one plant’s leaves look just like this.
Photo: whatseatingmygarden.blogspot.com.



A small “sugar baby” watermelon plant escapes a tub container it shares with a pair of eggplant plants. Photo: Sioux Rogers.



Tomatoes happily growing in concrete sewer pipes.
Photo: Sioux Rogers.