

## Gardening Miscellany

By Susan Camp

Writing the weekly Gloucester Master Gardeners “Gardening Corner” column for the Gazette-Journal each week is a pleasurable responsibility. I have no trouble finding a new topic each week. Most of the column ideas come from readers on the Middle Peninsula and friends all over our region who are looking for new plants and trees, wanting to design new gardens, or have concerns about protecting the environment.

I get so many questions that some never make it into a column because the short answer sometimes is the best answer and the topic doesn't provide enough substance for a full column. I take all queries seriously and attempt to find the most current, scientifically based information on the internet or in respected gardening books. This week, I will touch on a few interesting topics.

Can pomegranates be grown successfully outdoors on the Middle Peninsula? The short answer is, maybe not. Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) is 12 to 16-foot shrub native to Iran. It is grown throughout the Mediterranean area and northern India, as either a fruit crop or as an ornamental. In the United States, pomegranates for fruit are grown in California and Arizona. Pomegranate grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 7B through 10 and is drought resistant. The shrub needs a Mediterranean-type climate with a long, dry summer and a winter rainy season. Several ornamental varieties will grow in the lower South, but our humid summers can encourage a fungus that causes root rot. If you want pomegranates to eat, it probably is best to buy them at the grocery store.

I have been asked if I garden by the phases of the moon. The answer is no. I can handle the changing moon phases, but I am not organized enough to keep up with the continuously shifting zodiac signs. Astrological gardening has existed for centuries, and often is passed off as folklore, but recent research indicates that there may be some value in the method, particularly in relation to the moon's gravitational pull influencing the moisture in the soil. (University of Georgia Extension) Almanacs, books, online articles, and YouTube videos on the topic are available, if you want to try this age-old method of planting and harvesting. If I ever reach a point where I have only gardening to do, I might try it. What can it hurt? It doesn't add toxic chemicals to the soil or harm beneficial insects.

Here is a question I asked myself: What can I do with a bumper crop of marjoram, oregano, sage, lemon balm, and other perennial herbs? I pruned the herb plants in the early spring, cutting out dead stems and shaping them to look attractive. Every summer I do serious harvesting around the Summer Solstice, although I ran a few days late this year. Spring weather must have been perfect, because all of the plants are bushy and green, and I ended up with a counter filled with lush, fragrant cooking herbs. It is best not to cut too many different herbs at the same time, because they look the same as they begin to dry, especially oregano and marjoram. It is easy to mix them up, although you might develop an interesting blend that way.

A bouquet of fresh herbs makes a lovely hostess gift. Fresh herbs also perk up salads and vegetable and meat dishes. I always dry herbs, but you can have only so many jars of sage, unless you make a lot of sausage. Discard last years dried cooking herbs and replace them with this year's harvest.

A new hobby provides possible uses for excess herbs. Try your hand at making soap or incense or distilling essential oils. Craft projects using dried herbs make great Christmas gifts. Books, online articles, and YouTube videos abound.

Finally, to answer my two favorite questions: No, I do not pick my own mushrooms. And no, I will not tell you which ones to harvest in the woods.

Keep asking your questions! Except for the last two.

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