

Gardening above 4000 Feet by Marian Chambers

So many failures happen when gardening above 4000 feet in elevation. When you live above 4000 feet, north slope, with minimal sun, you envy people with sunny, southern views and no snow in March or April. But you are willing to try a garden, get seeds started, buy the best soil and hope for the best. You wait patiently until your time to plant, which is in late May or even June, and hope that a late snow storm does not come - but it always does. While gardeners below 4000 feet are basking in the success of their production and progress, you suffer from delays due to weather, squirrels and deer that seem to dominate the growing season. So, as I write this, the squirrels are gathering materials for winter storage and dropping acorns on the deck. The new fawns are trying out the garden plantings while falling sugar pine cones - like missiles - plummet to the ground.

You start seeds, buy seedlings and push on. But your sun is limited and, in late July when the squash only produces male flowers, the mites have taken over your zucchini and beans. Your hopes begin to decline, and you realize the garden is failing and it's time to go back to cool weather crops and greens. At another garden, a mere 2.5 miles away, everything is growing beautifully, because it has sun more than 10 hours a day. It is amazing what can happen within 1 or 2 miles in the foothills and mountain areas.

Greens like cabbage are wonderful, but I cannot grow a zucchini to save my life. The tomatoes are okay, but not spectacular. The garden has to be located on the deck since the deer will destroy anything edible during the prime growing location. Then there are the squirrels. The little devils just will mess with anything. Oh, and the failed potato crop, planted way too early and what a failure - great foliage, low yield! I guess I need to wait until June.

Starting everything from seed kept me busy with great expectations, only to be fouled by squirrels, mites, aphids, birds, deer and bears. I do have some success stories: great zinnias from 15+ year old seeds and wonderful basil from 15+ year old seeds. Napa cabbage is outstanding, as well as herbs and salvia. The hellebores are beautiful. Calendulas from 20+ year old seeds are also lovely. How was I successful with these older seeds? You ask? Well, these seeds were saved by storing them in a moisture free container, kept in the dark, and kept in the house for all those years.

In the end, it's best to go for the greens. The greens would include lettuce, spinach, swiss chard, and kale. Even in failures there are some successes. It becomes a decision of whether to pay for the water or just cut your losses. There is always hope for a gardener in the long run. In fact, I ended up replanting with lettuce, spinach, beets and carrots. To prevent the birds and squirrels from getting these new plants, I have enclosed all my containers with bird netting. This year has been a tough gardening year, but with persistence I still might be able to achieve a producing garden.

Marian Chambers is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who recommends using the UC IPM website which is: <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/>.

and the Tuolumne County vegetable planting dates:
<http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/files/149587.pdf>

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.