
THE CONSTANT GARDENER

BY GREG PETERSON



This morning I was up at dawn, and went out to my quarter-acre lot in the heart of Phoenix to feed the chickens, plant a garden bed and harvest fresh Asian pears—all before breakfast. This is my fun before work, my meditation before day starts, my connection to Mother Earth and my respite from city noise and crazy traffic. Besides being good for my soul, my ministrations yield a

never-ending harvest and something to eat every month of the year. On any given day, from the hottest to the coldest months, I find an abundance of food to forage here at the Urban Farm. This plethora of edibles results from my “year-round farming calendar.” And, while some months may be sparser than others, most seasons produce a bounty greater than I can consume.

In addition to my daily gardening duties, knowing what to plant when is key to my year-round farming. The fall crop planting ritual begins in August with the slow, thoughtful process of preparing the garden beds. As I make my way through cleaning up, I work around the still flourishing crops that I planted last April. These include cucumber, squash, eggplant, okra, melons, hot peppers and yams, many of which will continue to produce until they freeze in November.

I experience a keen sense of satisfaction once the garden beds have been tilled, mulched and fertilized and the fun of planting begins. A few heat-hardy crops can be planted in August, including arugula, chard, beets and carrots, but most are best saved for cooler weather. This period does, however, present a good time for planting nasturtiums; besides looking good, the entire plant is edible—adding a peppery punch to salads. Within a few weeks, the first rewards of my efforts will arrive. These fall crops will also last the longest. Many of the vegetables that I sow now will still be harvested through May.

As the temperatures cool with the arrival of September and October, I begin to contemplate a grander scale of planting, shifting my attention to cool-weather crops. The fall plantings cover the largest selection and varieties. Root crops like radishes and parsnips; brassicas like cabbage and

Brussels sprouts; and green leafy vegetables like spinach and broccoli raab will all flourish throughout the winter. I also plant snow and snap peas now, as they grow very nicely through the cold season, giving them a head start for the spring.

As January and the new year arrive and nature reawakens, I find that a fresh perspective shines in the garden. I use this time to become reacquainted with old friends when the fall crops are reseeded. I also plant beans, potatoes and artichokes. When I feel particularly ambitious, I start tomatoes and peppers indoors from seed. Ideally, tomatoes and peppers should be planted later as they are frost sensitive, but if they are diligently covered each evening they can go in by the first of February. To extend the growing season even longer, I plant the tomatoes in a warm area of the yard next to a block wall or concrete patio.

Early spring is also a good time to plant herbs (although they can be planted in other seasons as well). Herbs hold a sacred place in our gardens and kitchens as they add so much spirit to our foods. Sage, oregano, rosemary, thyme, curry, basil and mint, are easy to grow and do very well in our climate. One legendary oregano bush at the Urban Farm even requires a hedge trimmer so as not take over the front porch. Plant basil in a warmer area, as it will have a tendency to freeze in December and January. Also make sure to plant mint in pots, as once it gets established it can be quite invasive.

Life offers us challenges, and while some use meditation for solace, I find mine in the daily ritual of digging in the dirt on a little piece of land in North Central Phoenix. As a result, my garden flourishes year around. As with many paths, this flourishing comes as a result of patience and ongoing practice. To create those results in your own garden, be persistent. If something does not grow in one part of your yard try planting it in another. Let nature take its course sometimes. Show up every day not only to relish the fruits of your labor, but to delight in the process itself. In this way, you may also be a constant gardener.

PLANTING TIPS

Want more ideas for what to plant when? Check out the Urban Farm planting calendar on the Edible Phoenix website: www.ediblephoenix.com.

Photograph, Carole Topalian