**Fall Vegetables**

September is an important month for fall vegetable gardening. It is cool enough to have seed germination and there is enough mild weather left to produce a crop before the first freeze.

To prepare your raised beds for a productive fall gardening experience, apply 2 inches of compost over the surface, add 1 cup of slow-release lawn fertilizer per 50 square feet of bed and till or turnover the soil with a shovel.

The best compost is that which you make yourself, but most of us don’t have enough to meet all our needs, so we rely on commercial compost.

If you have a pick-up truck, you can pick up a cubic yard of compost at one of the many horticultural retailers spread throughout the area for about $30. Your options include Quality Supply, Keller Material, Fertile Garden Supply, Garden Ville and New Earth Materials. The suppliers will also deliver compost in large quantities.

Another option is to buy bags of compost at area nurseries. I have had good results with the manure compost.

The best tomato varieties for reliable production seem to be Sunfire, Solar Fire, Tycoon, BHN 602, 444, Celebrity, BHN 956 (Rodeo Cherry) and Phoenix. Sunfire produces tennis ball-sized fruit and is the quickest variety to produce mature fruit. It will only be available in limited quantities because it is no longer produced for commercial crops. Latch on to a few plants if you see them at your favorite nursery.

Heirloom tomatoes are fun to grow, but don’t expect them to be as reliable or as productive as the recommended varieties. Most heirlooms are indeterminate varieties that grow big plants too far into the season. A central Texas tomato needs to grow its foliage quickly and then concentrate on setting fruit before it gets too cold (winter) or hot (summer). Cherokee purple is the heirloom selection that seems to be competitive in the Milberger Top Tomato Contest.

Tomato cages are important to keep the plant upright and the fruit off the ground. Tomatoes are heavy feeders and use a lot of water. You may have to water them every day in high temperatures. Apply one-quarter cup of slow-release lawn fertilizer per plant every two days.

The main problem gardeners have with lettuce is that the seed must not be covered with soil if it is going to germinate. Prepare the soil by tilling some compost and slow-release lawn fertilizer, rake it smooth and then apply the seed. Irrigate with a gentle spray from a water wand every day until the seedlings appear and show regular leaves. Drip irrigation can be used after that point.

To have it pollinate, plant sweet corn in circles or at least five short rows. Sweet corn planted in the fall is subject to corn earworm infestation. Try to reduce the impact by spraying the growing portion with Sevin or Spinosad every week.

Summer squash is very susceptible to squash vine borers. Gardeners obtain some control by applying Sevin dust to growing points every week. Another option is to plant Tatiana (Mexican squash) instead; the square-stemmed squashes seem to be resistant to the vine borers. The seed is not easy to find; check your favorite nursery, and then check on the internet.