Gardening Calendar for July

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Our cool wet spring ended with a rash of high humidity heat in June. We can expect more heat in July, perhaps with less humidity.

Despite the heat, we learned last year how much more productive our fall crop of tomatoes is if we get them in the garden in late July. It is especially important that the larger fruited selections such as Tycoon, Solar Fire, 444, Valley Cat, and Bobcat are planted during the month. A second recommended tactic is to use several fast maturing varieties such as Surefire, Roma, and BHN 968 (cherry) as insurance. The quality of the fast maturing varieties is different than the larger tomatoes, but they are more reliably certain to ripen before cold weather arrives.

As for the spring tomatoes, they can be expected to have declined enough by early in the month to be pulled and composted. Leaving them in place after early July will usually result in more plant disease, mites, and insects than fruit. Based on testimony of the many gardeners I deal with as part of the Gardening South Texas Radio Show and this column, this was probably the best year for tomato production in recent memory. The Rodeo tomato, Red Deuce was especially outstanding. It challenged Tycoon for the designation of the best tomato for the season.

Red Deuce received selection of the Rodeo Tomato for 2016 because of its performance in the spring trials conducted by Dr. Jerry Parsons and his Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and Volunteer cooperators. It has not been tested for fall production. It will be fun to see if it can produce the same large, tasty, firm fruit as quickly in the fall as it did in the spring. A tomato variety did not need to be a heat setter this spring but it will probably be a bigger factor this autumn.

Pepper, okra, eggplant, watermelon, and southern pea production should continue strong through the month. Keep the fruit harvested to encourage maximum production of useable vegetables. Southern peas can be used as snap beans if you harvest them at an early stage before the pods fill out. Green beans, cucumbers, and summer squash will probably decline. Cantaloupe is always unpredictable.

Esperanza, poinciana, firebush, duranta, and thyrallis are blooming strongly. In the flower garden the early planted zinnias and cosmos are dropping seed unless they have been deadheaded. The reseeded plants are nearly as desirable as the original transplants, especially if you value nectar production for butterflies and hummingbirds. The most common zinnia transplant available in area nurseries is the hybrid, Dreamland. The flowers are large, compact and colorful but they produce less nectar than the parent selections do.

Plant some Maximillian or similar sunflowers for the summer color and seed production. Lesser goldfinches, cardinals, and maybe even buntings will harvest the seeds.

Water is the key issue on lawn care in mid-summer. An average irrigation application of .5 inches every week should keep the lawn green. If you have healthy, thick zoysia, Bermuda grass or buffalo grass you can save on the water bill by letting the grass go dormant. The grass will turn straw color but the thick sod will keep the weeds out and the lawn will green up again when the rains resume. St Augustine has less ability to go dormant in the summer but if it is growing on 6 inches of soil it will survive with an irrigation application every two weeks.