

# May Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

May is the ideal month to plant the heat-lovers--the vegetables and flowers that seem to thrive and bloom more lustily when the weather's hot and sunny. Earlier in spring and later in fall, we coddle them to stretch the seasons, but now is when they grow really fast. Other plants may tolerate our summers, flourishing in spring and fall; but these plants relish the heat and bright light. Just keep them well-mulched and watered, and they'll produce exuberantly.

## Vegetables and Fruits

Sow seeds of lima and snap beans, beets, carrots, celery, chard, chic-ory, chives, corn, cucumbers, eggplants, leeks, warm-season lettuces, melons, okras, green onions, peanuts, peppers, pumpkins, soybeans, warm-season spinaches, squashes, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes.

Use legume inoculant with the beans for better germination as you did earlier with peas. Sprinkle a bit in the hole or furrow, place the bean on top, cover with soil, and water it all in.

If you plan to preserve some of your garden's bounty, you may prefer to grow vegetable varieties which will be ready for harvest all at one time. On the other hand, you may prefer processing several small batches rather than making a marathon effort. In this case, reseed or transplant seedlings every two or three weeks for continuous harvests.

Interplant cucumbers and beans to repel cucumber beetles and prevent the wilt diseases they carry. Also plant *Cucurbita lagenaria* gourds as trap plants for cucumber beetles. Plant potatoes to repel squash bugs.

Plant corn in blocks of at least four rows in each direction to assure good pollination. Make succession plantings through the end of June only, as later plantings generally suffer from severe smut problems when they mature in September.

Corn stalks make convenient pole bean supports. Plant the beans after the corn is six inches tall, no sooner, or the beans will outgrow the corn.

When hand-picking those hard-to-see tomato hornworms, sprinkle the plants lightly with water first. Then, as the horn-worms wiggle to shake off the water, you can easily see them and remove them.

Take no harvests this year from the asparagus, artichokes, and rhubarb that you planted this spring. Let the plant use all its energy to develop a good root system, instead of expending it sending up more shoots.

Trellises provide support for greater fruit production per square foot of soil and for longer periods because more leaf area is exposed to sunlight for more photosynthesis, and more air circulation means less fruit rot and ground-insect attack. Vines spreading on a trellis provide shade for a porch, patio, or wall. Crops grown on a trellis are easier to pick and cleaner, not available to snails and slugs, and not prone to ground rot.

Some vines need more guidance and anchoring onto the trellis than others, but all will grow well with proper fertilization and irrigation. Clamp clothes pins attached to twine on each side of a vine for easy adjustment as the vine grows.

Support heavy fruits on shelving, in netting, or with rags or old nylons. If left unsupported, their weight will drag the vines down from the trellis. When weeds are pulled up from beneath trellised vines, there is less injury to the cultivated plants because of vines and fruits shoved out of the way.



Thornless boysenberries enable painless harvesting of succulent treats.  
Photo by Yvonne Savio,  
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When foliage on garlic, bulb onions, and shallots begins to dry naturally later this month, stop irrigating. This will encourage the dry outer layers to form on the bulbs--necessary for long storage. When about half of the foliage slumps to the ground naturally, bend the rest to initiate this maturing. The bulbs will be ready for harvest when the foliage is thoroughly dry and crisp.

When removing spent pea vines, cut them off at the soil level rather than pulling them out. The roots should have nodules that contain excess nitrogen from their fixation process, and this nitrogen is released into the soil as the roots decompose, available for the next crop's roots.

Fertilize strawberries with a balanced fertilizer now and after each heavy fruit-bearing period for continued strong growth and fruit set. A seaweed and fish emulsion solution offers many micronutrients. Avoid mulching with manure, however, as strawberries are not tolerant of salt, and manure (especially chicken) has a relatively high level. Even with excellent irrigation and drainage, summer heat will cause this saltiness to burn the berry plants.

Plant citrus and other tender trees. Keep the soil well mulched to hold in moisture with fewer waterings. Too little water results in stunted growth and reduced fruiting.

Fruit tree "suckers" (growing from the base of the plant or tree) or "watersprouts" (growing straight up from a branch) compete for water and nutrients but bear no flowers or fruit. On citrus, these wayward shoots have long thorns and leaves that look different from those on "regular" branches. Yank them out or roughly cut or smash them to discourage regrowth. It's nice to know that the rootstock is so healthy, but you want the energy to go into the flowers and fruit.

Feed fruit trees, now that they're actively growing. They'll provide a good leaf canopy with these additional nutrients.

Paint tree trunks with light-colored indoor latex paint to prevent sunburn damage. Use an inexpensive brand, or thin down an expensive one to half paint and half water.

Thin grape bunches and marble-sized tree fruits for superior fruit quality. Tree branches or vines may break if too much fruit is left on them. Remove about half of the number of grape clusters--more on young vines. Thin tree fruits on alternate sides of branches for balance. The minimum distance to leave fruits on branches is determined by the age of the tree and the size of the mature fruit. Five to eight inches for apples, pears, peaches, and nectarines; four inches for plums and apricots. In general, leave on the tree or vine only what you will realistically use. Thin too much rather than not enough so trees and vines aren't strained. Nut trees will usually take care of their own thinning.

Renew mulches under grapes and berries. Strawberries and blueberries benefit from loose, acid mulches such as pine needles or rotted sawdust. Raspberries and blackberries prefer a hay or straw mulch.

Carefully collect and destroy all leaves affected by peach-leaf curl or other diseases. Do not compost these leaves or use them as mulch, as this will spread the diseases.

## Ornamentals



Bintje potatoes are one of many heirloom and rediscovered favorites for home gardens. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Sow or transplant ageratum, alyssum, globe amaranth, aster, baby's breath, bachelor's buttons, balsam, fibrous begonia, bougainvillea, calendula, campanula (bellflower, canterbury bells), candytuft, carnation, celosia (cockscomb), chrysanthemum, clarkia (godetia), cleome, coleus, columbine, coral bells, coreopsis, cosmos, English daisy, gloriosa daisy, marguerite and Shasta daisies, dahlias, delphiniums, dianthus (pinks, sweet william), forget-me-nots, four-o'clocks, foxgloves, gaillardia, gazania, gerbera (transvaal daisy), geum, geranium, hollyhock, hosta (plantain lily), impatiens, lantana, larkspur, linaria, lobelia, lunaria (honesty, money, and silver dollar plant), marigold, morning glory, nasturtium, nicotiana, pansy, penstemon, periwinkle (vinca), petunia, phlox, California and Oriental and Shirley pop-pies, portulaca (moss or sun rose), potentilla (cinquefoil), primrose (primula), pyrethrum (painted daisy, painted lady), rosemary, salpiglossis, salvia, scabiosa (pincushion flower), snapdragon, statice (sea lavender and other colors), stock, strawflower, sunflower, sweet pea, tithonia (Mexican sunflower), verbena, vinca, viola, and zinnia.



Sierra Madre's historic wisteria, planted in the 1880s, blooms profusely and covers two houses and their yards. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Blooming plants can brighten shady garden areas and provide lush foliage during hot summers. In dense to medium shade, plant begonia, coleus, and impatiens. In light shade with partial sun, plant ageratum, canterbury bells, lobelia, nicotiana, and salvia.

Blooming shrubs that need little water when they're mature include abelia, bottlebrush, broom, ceanothus, cotoneaster, crape myrtle, grevillea, oleander, pittosporum, pyracantha, raphiolepis, rockrose (cistus), and strawberry bush.

For fragrance, plant citrus, gardenia, jasmine, mock orange, and roses.

Start tuberous begonia bulbs in a sandy compost mixture in filtered sun, and keep them well-watered from the bottom. Other bulb-type plants to start include amaryllis, caladium, calla lily, canna lily, dahlia, gladiolus, tigridia, tuberose, and watsonia.

Plant cactus, succulents, and palms. Water to settle them in well, but allow the soil to dry out between future waterings.

Remove faded blooms and seedpods from spring-blooming bulbs, but leave the foliage on until it dies back naturally. Apply a balanced fertilizer for next year's strong growth and bloom. When the foliage has died back completely, dig the bulbs up, gently remove any soil (but don't wash them), and store them in a cool, dry, well-aerated area.

Prune tips of azaleas, carnations, chrysanthemums, fuchsias, geraniums, impatiens, lavender, marguerites, marigolds, petunias, rhododendrons, rosemary, sedums and zinnias to gently shape the plants and encourage them to bush out. Root these cuttings. Don't allow coleus plants to flower--the blooms are insignificant, and the colorful foliage becomes skimpy.

Cut back spring-blooming shrubs and vines, including clematis and wisteria, to shape them and promote flowering wood development for next year.

For bushier mums with lots of blooms this fall, pinch back stems after each six inches of growth. Continue pinching until July, then let growth develop naturally, staking as desired.

Mow lawns once or twice a week. Set mower blade height to between two and three inches. Don't cut off more than 25 percent of new growth at a time, or the lawn won't have enough "green part" to grow well.

Keep the lawn fertilized with a slow-release fertilizer just enough to grow well but not so much it stimulates lots of lush, water-demanding growth that'll keep you mowing!

Begin to change lawn watering patterns from every several days to only once a week or ten days. Let the grass tell you when it needs to be watered--it'll wilt slightly and turn from bright green to dull green. Continue

to water deeply to thoroughly moisten the soil down to the bottom root tips (6 to 12 inches deep). This will allow the surface of the soil to dry between waterings and encourage deep rooting, so the lawns are healthier and can go longer between waterings. Diseases develop when grass blades and the soil surface are constantly wet, especially when the weather's warm.

Weekly or so until fall, prune the spent blooms on roses down to the first five-part leaf or a bit further to gently shape the plant; then feed it lightly, and water. Also, prune out shoots from the rootstocks below the grafts and twiggly growth, especially in the center of the plant, for better air circulation. Water only in the mornings, so water on the foliage will dry before sunset--lessening mildew and other disease problems.

## General

Maintain a good mulch of organic matter covering garden soil throughout the summer. This prevents crusting and cracking of the soil surface, holds in moisture, encourages earthworms, moderates soil temperatures for optimum root growth, improves the soil as it decomposes, and prevents weeds from germinating. A two-to-four inch layer of mulch decreases evaporation from the soil by 70 percent or more, allowing you to water less often (but still deeply). Keep mulch several inches away from tree trunks and plant stems, however, for good air circulation.

Watering patterns you begin now will help or hinder your plants' abilities to thrive

--not just survive--during the extended heat of summer. When germinating seeds, water the beds or flats several times a day until the plants are up, and then at least once a day until the second set of true leaves develops. "True" leaves look like miniature versions of mature leaves.

When seedlings are transplanted, change to a less-frequent and deeper watering pattern to encourage roots to grow deeply into the soil for moisture rather than spread just below the soil surface. During hot, dry spells, these deeper roots will have access to moisture for continued strong growth, but the shallow roots won't. This watering pattern will also save you time and irrigation water, since the water will sink deeper and evaporate less. Build soil basins around large plants and trees to prevent runoff until it's absorbed.

Avoid overhead irrigation so late in the day that foliage cannot dry completely before sunset. Fungal and bacterial diseases thrive in warm, moist conditions and can develop overnight.

When transplanting seedlings or larger plants, apply a mild solution of a balanced fertilizer such as 16-16-16, or one that is low in nitrogen and high in phosphorous and potassium such as 5-10-10. This gives the plant a complete supply of the nutrients it needs for sturdy growth. A heavy application of nitrogen such as 16-5-5 at planting time will encourage too much green growth too soon and result in lower yields later. Feed plants again six weeks after transplanting, and again when the first fruit and vegetable blossoms open, to encourage continued strong growth and plentiful fruit set.

While some manure is good for your garden, a lot is not necessarily better, especially if it's chicken manure and the weather is hot. Excessive levels of salt and ammonia may result in burning seedlings and reduced yields, if not killing the plants--and the salt remaining in the soil may limit your choices for future crops.

Continue pulling weeds before they form flowerheads or scatter their seeds, and you'll have fewer weed problems later. Watering the day before weeding will ease the chore, and weeds' entire root systems will come out more readily. If you leave pulled weeds in garden pathways for dry mulch, be sure to leave them with their roots up so they don't reroot. But don't leave weeds that have already developed their seedheads--some seeds may mature and germinate next year. You don't want your weeds to recycle themselves!

Continue adding to your compost pile. Alternate shovelfuls of old compost or soil with fresh grass clippings, kitchen peelings, leaves, softwood prunings, or annual weeds that have not gone to seed. Keep the pile evenly moist. Turning it every week will speed the decomposition. With no turning but good aeration, compost should be ready by the fall.

Encourage bees to visit your garden for better pollination. They'll come more readily if you provide with their favorite plants--including basil, borage, calendulas, catnip, hyssop, lemon balm, mint, summer savory, thyme, and other plants with blue flowers.

To attract butterflies to your garden, plant asters, lantanas, buddleias ("butterfly bush!"), marigolds, sweet williams, tithonias (Mexican sunflower), zinnias, and other daisy-like flowers.

If you like to provide birds with nesting materials, the Audubon Society recommends staying away from fabric, yarn, and similar materials which hold moisture and can increase the danger of respiratory diseases among baby birds. Instead, provide straw, hair, and other non-absorbent materials.

Keep ants off of your hummingbird feeder by spreading olive oil on the tip that dispenses the sweet water. The ants will stay away, but the taste doesn't seem to bother the birds.

Don't worry about a few aphids--they won't harm your plants. Greater numbers can be dislodged by spraying forceful jets of water (place your hand behind the bloom to support it as you spray). For more severe infestations, use insecti-cidal soaps or stronger sprays--and bring in the ladybugs!

For handy labels, use masking tape. Stick a strip of the tape onto a container of a concentrated solution such as liquid fertilizer. Write abbreviated instructions on the tape with indelible ink. Rather than having to locate and reread the full-length directions each time, just refer to your simplified version on the tape.

Place a rubber washer around a length of dowel at the correct planting depth to punch planting holes for big seeds like corn and beans without bending. The washer can be moved up or down the dowel to adjust for differences in seed depths. Less bending means you can garden longer!

Use plastic baskets from cherry tomatoes or strawberries to protect newly-sprouted seedlings such as corn, cucumber, melons, and squash from birds. By the time that the seedlings have grown tall enough to reach through the tops of the baskets, they are no longer as tender and delectable as the birds prefer.

Support stems of chrysanthemum plants growing closely in beds with chicken wire unrolled the length of the bed and staked one foot above the soil. The stems will grow up through the holes and support themselves to their full height without toppling over. Setting up the wire support is easier than staking each plant, selective cutting of blossoms is easier, and clean-up is quickly-accomplished