

## Renfrow Hardware

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## David's Gardening Ramblings

*You can plant edibles in your garden and yard 365 days of the year.  
 You can harvest food from your garden 365 days of the year."*

If you would like to grow more of your own food, remember that the task is easier than you think. The hardest parts will be your inability to accept less-than-instantaneous results and your inability to accept failure - nearly always of your own making. The patience and humility that you will learn while gardening will be just as good for your health as will be the nourishment you get from your own harvests. Aim for a "C+" overall garden in the beginning. The "B+" garden comes after your first year. The "A-" garden takes about four years to achieve.

**Successful gardeners plant successively.** Take baby steps. Plant something every week. Most crops can be planted for four months. Tomato plants should be set out on approximately April 15<sup>th</sup>, May 15<sup>th</sup>, June 15<sup>th</sup>, and July 15<sup>th</sup>. The "A-" gardener can plant tomatoes earlier and later than these dates.

For descriptive purposes, at Renfrow's we have four seasons for *planting*. Fall planting: August-November. Winter: December-February. Spring: March-May. Summer: June-July. Planting seasons are not to be confused with harvest seasons. For *harvest*, fall is basically October-December. Winter is January-February. Spring is March-May, and summer is June-September. Refer to the "Poor Renfrow's Almanac" to get into the habit of knowing your planting and harvesting seasons by the holidays. We have found that modern busy families most easily get that "second nature" of garden planting committed to memory through associating it with their social holiday calendar.

For example, Labor Day is the time for planting sugar peas, broccoli, cabbage, etc. Halloween is for garlic and is our average first frost date. Thanksgiving is still in time to plant some late onions. It is time to go full-force into summer plantings on Tax Day. Find some crop that you can plant on your birthday every year. Each holiday is really plus or minus one week in either direction. Other factors have to be taken into account, such as soil moisture conditions, sun, wind, rain, nighttime temperatures, etc. You should have at least three plantings of lettuce during the fall and two or three plantings in the spring.

The beauty of our climate is that most crops planted in September can also be planted around Valentine's Day. As a rule, the fall/winter harvest window is much longer than the spring harvest window, but fresh harvests in February, March, and April make winter plantings worth it. Most crops will be better planted before winter versus at the tail end of winter. We also basically have such a long warm-weather growing season here that beans, squash, tomatoes, etc. can be double-cropped right on the same land back-to-back, with excellent results.

Good farmers and gardeners are some of the smartest folks I know and I think it is because they understand the natural calendar so well. If you plant something every week and harvest something every week, in a few years you will be an expert. You will have had lots of failures, with most of the early ones being stupid mistakes, but the victories will be far greater. You can only learn so much from books or the internet. You have to get dirty and sweaty to make the necessary mistakes. By the way, the internet can be both good and bad. Be discerning while you surf. The extension websites of Clemson, NCSU (go Pack!) and NCA&T are usually very helpful and the most applicable to our climate. YouTube videos are usually pretty good. Make a rule that for every hour you spend surfing, you spend an hour in the dirt. If you do this, you will be okay!

I keep talking about mistakes because I have made them and customers repeatedly make them. Every new gardener plants way too much in their space. The population of plants and seeds per acre is usually double what it should be. That is the American way. Tomato plants need to be 4-6 feet apart for optimal production. Lettuce plants need 6-10" for optimal production. Either double your available garden land or cut your crops in half. A family of five with small children can go on vacation in a sedan. When the kids grow to be lanky teenagers and the parents have "upsized," you will need a suburban or minivan. Plants grow fast and need lots of sunlight without having to compete with neighboring plants. Most plants need 8 hours of good sunglasses-wearing, sunscreen-slathering sunshine. That is why farmers grow in fields instead of woods. You will never reach a good production level of annual vegetables in an area that does not have enough sun. Cut trees or move or get a garden spot somewhere else if your yard is too shady.

It is so important to get a mentor if you are new gardener. Someone in your neighborhood or house of worship or book club is already gardening. Learn from them. For every thirty minutes of listening, give them thirty minutes of weed pulling or harvesting labor. You will become fast friends. Visit the Matthews Farmers' Market to see what can be grown here. If you ask gardening advice from the farmers, purchase something from them. Their work is hard and meaningful, just like your job and life.

Your time is too valuable to spin your wheels down the wrong path. I cannot stress enough the importance of thinking locally when gardening. I mentioned NCSU and Clemson. I mentioned the Matthews Farmers' Market. I mentioned finding a mentor. Let me also mention locally adapted seeds and locally grown plants. Chain stores are not always carrying what is suitable to our local area. Mail-order seed companies that are local are also the best. SowTrue Seeds from Asheville, NC or Park Seed Company in Greenwood, SC are good options but your best option is a local retailer that is already in-tune with what works around here. Planting the wrong kind of blueberry, grape, lettuce, or tomato plant is a time-consuming mistake. Observing and chatting with other customers at the farmers' market or a local store is the way to learn.

Generally, planting seeds directly in the ground and thinning as they come up is the easiest and cheapest way to garden. Twenty-five years ago it was almost unheard of to sell a squash or cucumber plant at Renfrow's. Seeds are so easy to put in the ground and forget about; plants need babysitting. It is the same with dill, watermelon, okra, and countless other seeds. It is the same "instant" gratification that a squash plant gives you that can also make you an impatient "it's not

my fault the plant died” gardener. You must learn long division before you can effectively use a throw-away calculator. Use plant starts to extend your season early and late, but use seeds wherever possible. We can always advise you about the particulars.

We do not sell any genetically modified seeds or plants at Renfrow’s. Never will. WE have some hybrids for the right reasons, but most seeds, bulk or packaged, are called “open-pollinated” or “heirloom” varieties. No agribusiness company has any patent on them and you may choose to grow them and save your own seed crop. It is your right. The only seed we have that has been treated with fungicides are certain hybrid sweet corn varieties because that is the only way the agribusiness giants will sell them. We do have alternatives, but they are disappearing due to corporate mergers. “Organic” Cherrybelle radish seed is the same variety as the “conventional” packaged Cherrybelle radish and is the same as the bulk Cherrybelle radish seed, all at Renfrow’s. Organic means how the farmer grows his seed crop. We support the organic seed growers completely, but also offer conventionally grown seed for the economy of larger gardeners and farmers.

Organic seed farmers are growing more heirloom varieties than the big agribusiness seed companies. We can advise you about your particular interests, but know that every variety we sell is great for our area. During these times of near-zero rate of return on investments and retirement plans, I can think of no better return on your investment than seeds. Thirty or forty dollars worth of seed and some limited knowledge and some reasonably hard work can yield you a three or four hundred dollar return in about four months. Think about that kind of return the next time you spend that money on a night eating out or a family trip to the movies or a round on the golf course.

Gardening has to be mostly about eating well, saving money, and making your yard and labors help to pay the mortgage. If you take up golf there is the initial investment of hundreds of dollars for clubs and attire, then there are greens fees. The benefits of golf are real, but remember the costs when it comes time to purchasing your gardening tools and supplies. Man has grown food and shown a “profit” for thousands of years. Buy good stuff that lasts and stay away from exotic frills until you learn what is really necessary. Rent or borrow a tiller before you purchase one. Plant a “flat” garden in your yard before you invest in raised bed construction. Stick to maters, squash, beans, lettuce, beets, Swiss chard, and turnips before experimenting with lower-yielding crops like asparagus, peaches, corn, and watermelons. Stick to organic fertilizers. No one has ever killed a plant or any earthworms with them like they can with Miracle Gro or 10-10-10.

Every new gardener and many experienced gardeners *overwater*. Act like you have to purchase water in jugs like fuel, or draw it out of your well by hand, and you won’t overdo it. Irrigation to supplement rain has its place, but if we are getting rain once a week, plants will be okay. Frequent watering encourages the plants’ roots to stay shallow. The top few inches of the ground gets hot in the summer and the shallow-rooted plants suffer. When they suffer, bugs and disease can attack. Force the roots to go down deep where there is always some moisture. Frequent watering also fills the necessary voids in the soil, and therefore oxygen cannot pass through the soil to the roots of the plants.

Lime your garden yearly. It is the cheapest and best thing that you can do for your soil. Add organic matter. Compost all of your leaves and also get your neighbor's leaves. Soil is the proverbial three-legged stool. One leg is the minerals from crushed rock; one is the organic matter from dead plants; one is the "life" that lives in your soil. This life comes from compost worms and your lack of use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Remove one leg and you *will* fall over. We stock boxes for free soil tests that you can send off to the state of NC. The results of your test will help you improve your soil. A soil test is like a cholesterol test. You don't know where you stand without it.

### **Recommended Reading and DVDs**

*Food Rules* by Michael Pollan

*The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan

*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver

*This Organic Life* by Joan Dye Gussow

*Four Season Harvest* by Eliot Coleman

*Food Inc.* (film)

*King Corn* (film)