

Gardening Newsletter

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Wet Weather Notes

The early onset of wet, cold, windy fall weather is catching a few late summer crops at a tricky time. Here are some notes on what to do right now, including responses to questions I've been asked recently:

Seeds: If you are saving some of your own seeds this year and they are still out there in the wet, try to get them harvested and into dry conditions immediately so that you don't end up with moldy or sprouting seeds. If the seeds have not matured they will have to stay on the plant until they do, but usually there are lots of mature seeds present on plants along with immature seeds and the mature ones should be salvaged ASAP. The same goes if you are growing a crop of seeds to eat, such as dry beans, quinoa or sunflower seeds: harvest everything that is ready now.

Winter squash and pumpkins: If they are mature, harvest them now (many will already have been harvested). If they are not mature they have to stay on the vines in hopes they will have enough time to mature over the next few weeks. The rain won't hurt them and even a light frost that kills the vines generally doesn't injure mature fruit. Squash is ripe when the skin has darkened to the characteristic colour for the variety and the skin is very hard. Test this by pressing your fingernail into the stem (NOT the skin of the squash). If the stem is as hard as wood and you can't make a dent in it, then the fruit is mature. Vines that have lost a lot of leaf area to powdery mildew can still continue to mature fruit (slowly) so regardless of weather, state of leaf infection, etc., if the fruit is not ripe you should leave it on the plant. You have nothing to lose by leaving them on the plants in any case, because immature squash won't ripen off the vine.

Onions: Some late onions grown from seed might still be out in the garden. If so, pull them and start curing them in a dry, warm place, indoors. Even if the stems are still rather thick and the tops haven't bent over, the stems will shrivel and close up in the drying process.

Sweet potatoes/"yams": If you are growing these outdoors you might as well harvest since it is too cool for them to put on any growth at these temperatures. The rain is no problem, but the low temperatures are. If they are in a greenhouse, they might yet get some warm enough days to continue growing.

Cabbage splitting alert: Cabbages can take up water too fast in these wet soils that the heads split, especially if they were kept short of irrigation water earlier. Prevent this by disrupting some of the fine roots, either by wrenching each head a quarter turn in the soil or by chopping downward with a shovel on two sides of each plant. You don't want to kill the plants, just damage the fine root hairs that take up water.

Curing vegetables: If you have any onions, garlic or winter squash that you have been curing under a roof overhang or in an outbuilding, they should now be brought indoors to finish curing. It is too humid outdoors now, even in a garden shed, to store these crops successfully. It is more important to keep them dry than it is to keep them cool, though if you have a dry and cool place that is the ideal. "Cool" can just be "guest bedroom" temperature: any room that might have the thermostat turned low much of the time or it can be basement temperature if it is a dry basement, not a crawl space.