



Urban Harvest

Plant Health Suffers when You Exceed Growing Season

By Ray Sher, Homes Correspondent

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Shown are Harlequin bugs, which infest kale and arugula plants that don't like warm weather.

Wouldn't it be great to have a longer growing season for tomatoes, cucumbers, kale and other vegetables? We could enjoy eating many of our favorite vegetables for a longer period of time.

Some gardeners spend time and energy creating shade in the summer and warmth in the winter to extend the growing season. But most of the time, gardeners allow their plants to keep producing until the plant gives up and dies from exhaustion, old age, disease and pest damage.

I try to make a conscious effort to let plants produce abundantly through their healthy stage, and then remove the plants, though they could continue to produce a little for a few more weeks. There are three main reasons I do this.

First, the plant really is not producing very much, and by removing the plant and planting something else, I can get more production earlier from the new planting.

Second, once the plant ceases to produce very much, it is a sign its life is waning, and is open for disease and pests. Removing the plant at this time can often keep disease and pests out of the garden. Often, the reason a plant stops producing is the weather has changed to something that is not ideal for the plant, so the plant becomes less healthy and more prone to disease and pests.

Third, I don't want to spend my time, energy and water trying to get a few more fruit from resistant plants.

The disease and pest issues alone present a strong case for quickly removing dying plants. In the spring and early summer of this year, I have seen several gardens with kale and arugula plants that are infested with harlequin bugs and flea beetles. This is because the brassica family of plants does not like hot weather, becomes weak and unhealthy, and thus open to predation by pests. When I talked with the gardeners, they were resistant to removing the plants because they could still harvest some leaves, though a lot of the leaves had visible damage from the bugs.

The reproductive cycle for most pests is very quick, so many generations can form, creating a huge increase in the pest population. This is an issue because those pests will not leave the garden. The longer you leave the infested plant in the garden, the closer you bring the pest to the next planting season, and a continued increase in population, which is an ideal environment for destruction of the next season's crops.

The same scenario applies to diseases on the plants. Diseases don't just go away when we eventually pull the plants. Rather, the diseases remain in the soil. The longer we leave diseased plants in the garden, the more disease will be in the soil waiting to infest plants in later seasons.

My advice is to enjoy your healthy plants and the produce they provide, and then remove them quickly before the pests and diseases arrive, or as soon as you see the first pest or significant disease.

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