

Keep a Gardening Journal

By Susan Camp

This week's column started out as an explanatory piece on the differences between warm season and cool season crops, geared specifically toward novice vegetable gardeners.

While searching for some new and interesting information on tomatoes and zucchini and any information at all on Swiss chard, leeks, and salsify, I turned to the online edition of the "North Carolina Extension Gardener Handbook," a colorful and well-written resource that is available for free online to everyone and in hardcover for a price.

I didn't discover any fascinating facts on seasonal crops, but the title of Appendix A: "Journaling" caught my eye and took me back to Christmas of 1994 when I received a large, hardcover garden journal. Bound in dark green, the journal weighed at least four pounds. It wasn't a pocket-sized, 100-page spiral notebook for jotting down daily observations. It was a 12-year journal that, when completed, would contain every jot of information concerning my beginning adventures in gardening: weather, soil conditions, plants, pests, disease, bloom time, and anything else related to growing things.

I began with good intentions and recorded garden events pretty faithfully for about six months, then more erratically for another year or so. I never completed the 12-year journal, and it landed in the recycle bin a few years later. I discovered I was not a Thomas Jefferson who reportedly tromped around his gardens at Monticello every day, no matter the weather, and recorded in his little pocket notebook every detail concerning the health and productivity of each plant.

Do I regret not sticking to my garden journaling? Yes and no. I wish I had better records of which plants worked well in specific areas of the garden. I also regret not keeping accurate information on the many perennials, bulbs, and shrubs we planted over the years, and which ones survived and what killed the ones that did not. I don't regret not keeping track of every weather detail of each growing season for the last 30 years. It's Tidewater Virginia. Summers are hot and humid. What else is there to say?

While I will never be organized enough to consistently update a gardening journal, I found many helpful suggestions in Appendix A for growing and maintaining a healthy garden.

Draw a current map of your garden to scale, and include fences, arbors, hardscape, and structures; also, include wet and dry spots. Note the sun's movement through the seasons and when each area is in sun or shade. This may change over the years, as trees or structures are added or removed.

Have your soil tested every three years, and save the results on the computer or in a folder where you can find them easily. Appendix A recommends developing a spreadsheet with information on soil amendments, fertilizers, and amounts and dates of application.

Create a profile for each plant that includes the common and Latin Name; date and place of purchase; height and width at maturity; real or potential problems; and dates of pruning, fertilizing, or pest management.

I try to save every plant tag and place it in a plastic bag marked with the appropriate year so I can remember what I planted and when. I keep tags from plants that failed as well as ones that have survived. I also try to keep track of cultivar and variety names.

I take pictures of most of my plants when they are doing well and when they are failing. Photos not only provide pleasure, but they help me identify problems when they occur. If you can draw well, you may want to add sketches of leaves, flowers, and fruit.

Keep track of pests and diseases: when they occurred and what actions you took to remedy the problem. Document the outcomes.

Plan ahead for garden projects and set a budget for materials and labor.

Your journal entries can be as simple or as elaborate as you desire. They will provide you with a valuable record of your gardening journey.