



Variety is the Spice of Life

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The author's family heirloom green bean variety performed extremely well compared to other green bean varieties. No wonder it has been around so long (photo by M. Lisy)!

The old adage, “variety is the spice of life” may be the key to successful gardening in less than optimal years. Many times, I find that gardeners find their “favorite” variety of a crop, and plant that one type and nothing more. Occasionally there may be more than one variety, but only if they are different in type. For example, a person plants their favorite cherry tomato and favorite slicing tomato, but that is it. So, one kind of each type. Many times, this is done in response to limited space, which is understandable. This kind of gardening can leave you high and dry with virtually no crops on tough years, however.

COVID has inspired many people to garden lately. This stems from worries over food security to just having the extra time to enjoy this hobby. Some people find relaxation from growing plants in our busy, stressful world. Having said all that, it pains me to have a year like we did this past summer. Many experienced gardeners talk about what a disaster the summer has been for gardening. To a newcomer to the hobby, this type of experience can cause them to give up.

The key to ensuring a good harvest in the gardening world is diversity. This concept actually has its roots in ecological theory. We find that the most stable ecosystems are the most diverse ones. Likewise, our gardens can benefit from diversity as well. There are almost too many diseases to count, and each crop has its own set to which they are susceptible. Now there are exceptional cases where people are continually plagued by a particular disease year after year, but in general, trying to guess which disease will be around next summer is many times a futile effort. This is where diversity comes into play. When you plant a number of different varieties, you increase your chances of being able to “weather the storm.” It is like buying multiple lottery tickets in order to have a better chance of winning. In most years, all of your plants will produce. In bad years however, it may be only one or two varieties that can survive and produce.

Although we focus a lot on disease, many times it is the environmental factors that contribute to how well a disease can survive. This past summer was extremely wet and humid. These parameters cause plants suffer from too much water and not enough sun, but the fungal diseases thrived. We essentially had a situation where the environment was optimal for many pathogens, and almost detrimental to our plants.

To help illustrate this point, I will use a few examples from my garden this year. I normally plant three varieties of green beans: green, yellow, and purple. Historically, the purple has been the least productive, and we do not get very many to eat let alone preserve. This year, the purple are the all-stars, and we have a freezer full of the surplus. The green produced some beans, and the yellow variety almost nothing. Normally the green is the best, and it produces more than the yellow and purple combined. This data shows that the varieties of bean vary in more ways than just color. Out of the four cucumber varieties I planted, three did very well and one did almost nothing. In my tomato patch, I had some varieties produce very little and the plants withered and died. My yellow tomatoes, which are grown to liven up our dishes with a splash of color, were at the head of the pack as far as production goes. They essentially saved our season.

I hope this article convinces you to expand your horizons in the garden. You don't need give up on your favorite, just find a few more. Develop the diversity mindset and you will ensure a harvest in almost any type of year. Every once in a blue moon there may be a year that is totally disastrous, but in most years this planting style will guarantee a harvest, and many years a bountiful one.



a.



b.



c.

Although all these plants are past their prime in these photos, there were distinct differences in productivity. The best was the purple green beans, c, followed by the green, a. The yellow, b, barely produced anything (photo by M. Lisy).

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.