Tomatoes are starting to ripen – yummy! There is nothing like eating a tomato fresh off the vine. Try it! If you also like basil, just take a leaf off a plant, pop it and the tomato into your mouth – delightful! Tomatoes generally start ripening from the bottom up with the shoulders of the tomato being the last to ripen. Pick the fruit when the skin yields slightly to finger pressure (or when it falls off the vine into your hand when checking!). Tomatoes require a good amount of water during their growing season but once they start to ripen, you need to cut back on the amount. Too much water will cause your tomatoes to split. The key, however, is to be consistent with your watering and make sure your plants don’t suffer from major dry spells followed with a flood of water.

Beans are starting to flourish at this point. The warmer weather has given those crops that require it a shot in the arm and beans are one of them. The best thing you can do for your green (or wax or soy) beans is to keep them picked – that way they will continue to produce. Pick them when they are young and tender and before the seeds have begun to swell in the pod. Only pick them when the plants aren’t wet so disease doesn’t develop or spread. They can be stored in the refrigerator in plastic bags for about 1 week but you might want to share some with a friend or neighbor if you get inundated!
Beans are liked by a variety of bugs including cucumber beetles, Japanese beetles and Mexican bean beetles. These can all be hand-picked and drowned in a jar of soapy water. Try to do this in the early morning since they tend to be a bit sluggish at this time.

Unfortunately, along with tomatoes come tomato hornworms. Holes in your foliage or leaves that have simply been consumed, fruit that is partially eaten, and dark green or black droppings on the plant are all a good indication that these guys are at work.

Tomato hornworms get very large – 3-4 inches long and about the size of your finger; they have excellent camouflage – a light green color with white and black markings and a horn on its bottom. You can find them hiding under the foliage or blending in to a stem. Once you find one it will be much easier to spot any others. Sometimes you can even hear them chewing if you listen closely. Pick them off the plant and drop into a jar of soapy water. If you find one with clusters of small white eggs on its back it’s best to leave it alone. Those eggs are from a parasitic wasp that will destroy the hornworm and then look for others to parasite.

TIME TO DO THE GARLIC

When ¾ of the tops of the garlic that you planted last year have yellowed, it’s time to harvest. Check a single bulb by digging gently around it to loosen the soil, and then remove the entire plant. Try not to bruise or nick the bulbs, as they will not store as well. Bulbs should be well segmented and cloves easy to separate – if not they need to grow a bit longer.

Once you have dug them up, brush off excess dirt and spread plants in a single layer on a screen or paper (or tie into bundles to hang) in a warm, dry, airy location out of the sun. After 2-3 weeks, when the bulbs are completely dry (outer skins are paperlike), remove roots and tops leaving 1” of stem. Be sure they are completely dry: improperly dried bulbs will sprout. Store in a mesh bag (old onion bags work well) in a cool, dry location and use them as needed – delicious!

Garlic is used in all kinds of cooking, from Italian to Asian, with vegetables, bread or meat. The smaller a clove of garlic is chopped, the stronger it will be; and the longer it’s cooked, the milder it will be. So crushed raw garlic is the strongest, and slow roasted whole cloves are the mildest. If you’re worried about “garlic breath,” chew some fresh parsley along with your meal. And a little lemon juice will get rid of the smell on the cook’s fingers. Here’s a quick and easy recipe from www.garlic-central.com. Use it on everything from bread to baked potatoes.

**Garlic Cheese Spread:** Whir in a food processor the following ingredients: 8 ounces feta cheese, 8 ounces soft cream cheese, 1-2 tablespoons plain yogurt (less for a thick spread, more for a vegetable or chip dip), 4 cloves of crushed garlic (adjust to your taste). That’s it! Store in an airtight container in the fridge.

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