

Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian

Harvest Homecoming

“Tickle it with a hoe and it will laugh into a harvest.” – English Saying



Banana peppers are ready to harvest.

Photos Cynthia Brian



Thump a pumpkin and scrape your fingernail over the shell. If it doesn't pierce, cut the stem to harvest.



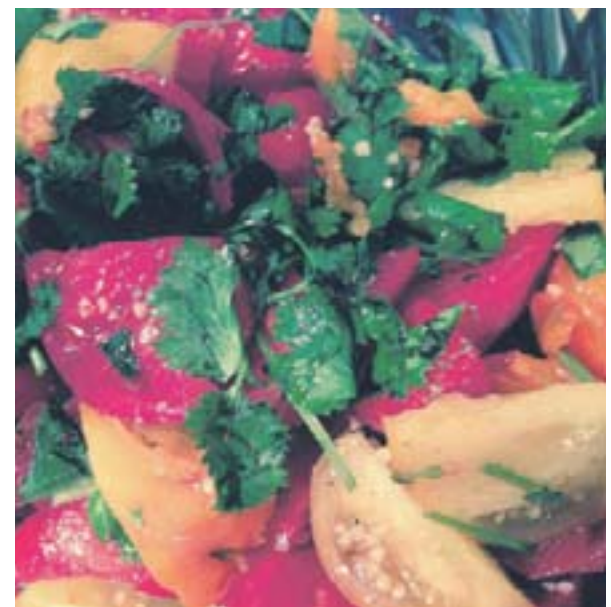
Dinosaur kale blooms and sets edible seeds. Eat the blooms and the leaves.

Growing up on our Napa farm, I fondly remember the harvest festivals of September and October. Organized by the local volunteer fire department, farm bureau, or 4-H Club, once all the crops had been harvested, the hoes were put down. The men ignited the flames on the huge homemade grills laden with farm-raised chicken, lamb, pork, and beef while the ladies prepared the potluck side dishes from bushels of fresh fruit and vegetables. Hay bale mazes, bobbing for apples, sack races, and piñata punching would be activities that entertained the kids. Everyone anticipated the rhythms of the fiddles, accordions, drums, horns, and guitars. Music signaled our time for foot stomping. It was time for the barn dance, heel kicking, and foot stomping.

As earnest gardeners who have not grown up in rural America, how do we know when the time is ripe to harvest our produce? Nature usually has a way of informing us about the optimum time to pluck your fa-

vorite vegetable or fruit at its peak. Berries are plump, juicy, and deep in color. Apples fall into your hand the second they are touched. Our noses lead us to the sweet smell of a ripe pear, our eyes shine on that perfect deep red tomato, and our ears hear the hollow thump of a crunchy melon. We use all of our senses to identify the best time to harvest including our common sense. If possible, pick your produce early in the morning, just as the sun is rising. The air is cooler and the crops are crisp, allowing them to last longer. If you wait to pick until the heat of the day, lettuces, radishes, peas, chards, and leafy greens will be limp and wilted. The second best time to harvest your non-droopy crops like zucchini, grapes, tomatoes, and root vegetables is early evening, preferably after the sun has set. The early sunbathing actually adds to their sugariness.

Here are time-tested suggestions to help you pick, pull, and pluck a sampling of your garden favorites at the peak of perfection. ... continued on page D14



A beautiful bowl of sun-ripened tomatoes in several colors tossed with cilantro makes a delicious autumn salad.