

April showers bring grumpy gardeners

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Anyone else feel like saying, “Really? Now you show up?” at this week’s rain? I know I should be grateful because all of us, flora and fauna alike, need the rain, but I am really itching to play in the dirt.

What’s a gardener to do when it’s rainy?

Well, even if the weather is frightful, the seedling selection is delightful at this weekend’s 2012 Tomato and Pepper Plant Sale sponsored by Master Gardeners of San Mateo and San Francisco counties. The event is 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, April 14 at the San Mateo Elks Lodge in San Mateo.

All 35 varieties of tomatoes for sale are known to do well in San Mateo and San Francisco counties, including varieties that shrug off cool and foggy conditions. A couple of varieties grow well in containers, including “Early Wonder.” The pepper seedlings range from sweet to hot, and all adapt to local conditions.

After you bring your seedlings home, don’t plant them right away. The ground and night temperatures are too chilly this time of year. Wait until mid-May. Until then, keep the seedlings outside in a spot that is sunny, warm and protected.

Get started with seeds

If you simply have to get started growing something, while your tomatoes and peppers wait until it’s warm enough, you can start on your vegetable garden by planting seeds for carrots, beans, corn, radishes and squash. You also can plant seeds for ornamentals that bloom in the summer and fall, such as cosmos, nasturtiums, sunflowers and zinnias.

Banish weeds, snails and slugs

Two other important tasks to do right now are to continue weeding, and have snails and slugs meet their maker.

Weeds are a lot easier to pull now, while the soil is damp. Yank them out before they set seed. As for snails and slugs, you can purchase bait to place in your garden, make a beer bait, or handpick them.

If you have pets that hang out in your garden, the safest methods for eliminating slugs and snails are to handpick the varmints, use a beer bait or use bait pellets made of iron phosphate, such as the brand Sluggo. Baits containing metaldehyde, the most common baits on the market, are very toxic to mammals. The pellet forms of these are particularly attractive to pets because they look like kibble and often have ingredients such as molasses or bran that attract snails and slugs — and your pets. An animal doesn’t have to consume very much metaldehyde to be poisoned.

Baiting with beer is easy. No, you don’t just open a bottle and leave it in the garden. You bury a shallow container, such as the tin can that your cat’s food comes in, so that the opening is level with the ground, and then you fill it with beer -- very cheap beer, I suggest. Snails like the yeast in beer, and will crawl in looking for a good time, not knowing it’s going to end really badly because they can’t swim. You, on the other hand, can open the better stuff in your refrigerator and toast their demise.

As for handpicking snails and slugs ... Oh, yes, it’s gross, but it’s possible to feel a perverse pleasure while doing it. So I’ve heard. Not that I have personal experience with it. Snails are easy to pluck and toss into a bag or pail of soapy water. Slugs are best grasped by a hand wearing a rubber glove. Hunt snails and slugs in the early morning, or at night using a flashlight (if your neighbors don’t already suspect you are a crazy gardener, this nocturnal exercise will confirm their hunches).

Next month, the real fun begins.

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