



Gardening Folklore

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Last fall A gardening friend who had just returned from England, brought me a book, “*Tips from the Old Gardeners*” compiled by Duncan Crosbie. I spent many hours going through it, reading about old wives’ tales and how much of this folklore actually had a lot of common sense behind it. For example, he says “Always grow herbs outside the herb garden”. This may not make much sense at first glance, but the natural chemicals contained in one plant may help another plant grow better or will protect it from pests and diseases.

All of the alliums, onions, chives, shallots, are beneficial to roses, protecting them against aphids, black spot and mildew. This is just one example of companion planting. You can find other examples on the internet by entering “Companion Planting” in your search bar.

“Plant in the evening, not in the morning”. Why? Well, just think about it. The heat of the day is past but the ground is still warm. The roots can benefit from the heat still in the soil, without the leaves being scorched by the sun. This goes not only for nursery potted plants, but also for transplanting as well.

What do we do to stimulate growth of our plants? We fertilize. Duncan Crosbie had another idea - for roses, dig in old banana skins just below the surface of the soil. The skins are packed with all sorts of minerals our soils lack. Although I wouldn’t try this method myself, those banana skins will quickly turn to compost in the soil. Compost as we know is an excellent fertilizer for plants as well as having other beneficial properties. Other unusual things mentioned in his book, don’t have any scientific basis at all.

On the topic of weeds, Mr Crosbie quoted an old country rhyme: “Cut thistles in May, they grow in a day; Cut them in June, that is too soon; Cut them in July, then they die.” The idea here is, if you cut them too soon, they will come right back. Cut them in bud, before they flower and go to seed, and they die.

Weeds are one of my biggest problems, and as I won’t use chemicals on my garden, I end up pulling them. One tool I use which is a great help is a Dutch hoe. It scoops under the weed, either lifting the roots or cutting it off at the base. They are much easier to pick up that way. Once I have the majority of the weeds removed, I add mulch. I prefer an organic mulch that will help the soil retain water and has no chemical dyes added. It will decompose over time (nourishing the soil) and need to be replenished. For weeds growing in the cracks of paving stones vinegar can be sprayed on them. It will not kill the roots, so future applications will be needed for control.

The “Old Gardeners” like to have toads around since they do a wonderful job of ridding our gardens of

pests. Their diet consists of a wide variety of insects and one toad can eat between 10,000 and 20,000 insects a year. Just after putting some cedar mulch around my plants, I noticed that the mulch had been disturbed. On closer inspection I saw a rather large toad peering up at me out of the nest he had made for himself. As amphibians can actually breathe through membranes in their skin, they are especially susceptible to chemicals, so be careful what is sprayed on your plants so that it won't harm beneficial creatures.

You may have heard that beer can be used to control slugs. Putting a saucer filled with beer in the garden is supposed to attract and drown slugs but it never worked for me. After reading "*The Truth About Garden Remedies*" by Jeff Gillman, I found out why. The top of the trap should be even with the top of the soil. The beer should be about 2.5 cm (1") below the top of the container. This way the slugs will have to stretch to reach the beer (and then fall in). The container should be able to contain about 12-15cm. (5-6") of beer.

There's a lot of truth to folk lore, but many of these remedies have no scientific foundation. The best anyone can do is to provide a healthy environment for your plants, one they are adapted for, and hope they will be able to withstand nature's challenges.

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