

## **October Musings on the Vegetable Garden**

**By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator**

Recently my friend Mary Anna returned from out of town to find her vegetable garden had been visited and the butternut squash eaten. Teeth marks on the squash remnants indicated that one or more squirrels were the culprits. Butternut squash wouldn't necessarily be a squirrel's first choice but as the growing season slows, all animals will look to our vegetable gardens as a ready food source.

If you're like me, you prefer to have your winter squash cure while still attached to the vine. Curing is the process where the rind of winter squash—butternut, acorn, blue Hubbard, and pumpkin, to name a few—thickens, increasing its storability. This is one vegetable that the arduous task of freezing, canning or dehydrating isn't necessary in order to enjoy them well into the winter months. A nice thick rind, a cool dry place and voilà, stored beta carotene with a minimum of fuss.

Curing of winter squash can also be done in an unheated garage or a shed—some place that doesn't freeze. Place several layers of newspaper on the floor first, lay out the squash in a single layer and then wait 1-2 weeks for the squash rind to thicken. They are ready for storage when a fingernail pushed into the skin doesn't cause a dent.

The vegetable garden in October still has something to offer, with the last of the beans, tomatillos, winter and summer squash, cucumbers, and tomatoes left to pick. Cooler than normal temperatures mean these warm season crops won't continue to grow. If you're lucky enough to have some cool season crops like cabbage, arugula, or radishes, these will continue to grow despite frosts. For the underground crops of potatoes, carrots and sweet potatoes, cold soil temperatures affect them differently. Carrots become sweeter in cold soils, sweet potatoes should be harvested immediately before or after frost so their storage capabilities aren't affected, and potatoes should be dug before soils become cold, otherwise the starches will convert into sugars, making for odd-tasting spuds.

Staying on top of harvest and clean-up is central to keeping animals from visiting the garden. It's too bad we can't train them to eat the cherry tomatoes that fall to the ground, saving gardeners from lots of volunteer tomato plants next year!

**Interested in finding out more about the Nebraska Extension Master Gardener program's 2019 Dodge County classes?** Plan to attend one of two informational meetings in November:

November 15, 5:30 pm, Nebraska Extension in Dodge County, 1206 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Fremont

OR

November 16, 1:30 pm, Nebraska Extension in Washington County, 597 Grant Street in Blair.