

Edible Estates



by Pam Bresler, HCMG

February is rose month, not just for Valentine's Day bouquets, but in the garden. The best time to prune your roses is around Valentine's Day. So, why is this information in a column on edibles? In the fall, rose hips can be harvested for jam, jellies and tea, as long as the roses weren't sprayed with pesticides. When we visited our Swedish "daughter" in Goteborg, it was fun to browse grocery stores for unusual products. Noticing a package of "Rose Hip Soup," Elin explained that if she had a cold or the flu, her mother made rose hip soup because it was full of Vitamin C. When you live in Scandinavia, citrus is hard to come by, but *Rosa rugosa* with their huge hips are abundant. Roses as edible landscaping! Also, rose petals are colorful sprinkled over a green salad or fruit salad. Be sure the roses are pesticide-free and remove the white base of the petals as it is bitter.

If eating roses isn't your thing, then you can start seeds of vegetable transplants in February. Starting them about six weeks before the last frost is a good rule of thumb. I start my tomatoes in early January, my peppers in early February and squash, cucumbers and melons, mid-February. Most people direct seed the last three, but between slugs, snails and birds, I find using transplants more successful. Also, the sooner the summer squash goes in the ground, the greater the likelihood that I'll harvest squash before the squash vine borer shows up.

I start seeds in community pots and use bottom heat to get them germinated quickly. An old heating pad on low is just the right temperature. Tomatoes sprout in three days with bottom heat. If the soil is too cool, the seeds of warm-weather crops can rot. Once the seedlings have two true leaves, I prick them out into small individual pots. *Gardener's Supply* (www.gardeners.com) has an all-in-one seed starting system: 24-cell growing tray, dome, capillary mat and water reservoir for about \$15. *Burpee* (www.burpee.com) has a similar system. *Gardens Alive's* "All-Roots" system has a bottomless 25-cell tray and a hydroponic system for seed starting (www.GardensAlive.com). It costs about \$25.

Once the seeds sprout and are potted, they can be grown in cooler conditions, like in a garage. You will need a strong light source, and a cheap shop light is perfect. The shop light's cool spectrum is fine for seedlings, but if you wanted to grow flowering plants, like African violets, you would need a full-spectrum bulb. You want the bulb to almost touch the foliage so the plants don't get leggy.

My light system is made with 1" I.D. PVC pipe, 2-48" fluorescent bulbs in a shop light, hanging by lightweight chains attached with an eye bolt, an extension cord and a timer. The light system is on a table for easy access. Group plants by height and raise or lower the chains as needed. The light is on for sixteen hours.



"Big Bertha" is the best bell pepper I ever grew. The vigorous growth of foliage prevented sunscald and the peppers never stopped until a hard freeze. "Juliet" is my must-have salad tomato from spring until frost. Seed catalogs can be seductive, but many of the varieties aren't suitable for our area, so shop wisely. Rather than list all the varieties of vegetable suitable for central Texas, check out this website from Travis County: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/travis/docs/VegetableVarietiesTravisCounty2010.pdf>

By the end of the month, fruit trees should be sprayed with dormant oil. Peach and plum trees need to be pruned. For pruning instructions see:

http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/hortupdate_archives/2000/mar00/h5mar00.html

Apples, pears and figs don't need pruning. The less you do to pear trees, the better. Too much TLC on pear trees can encourage Fire Blight disease.

Asparagus crowns, strawberries, artichoke plants, onions plants and other cool-weather transplants can still be planted in February. Plant seeds of kale, lettuce, spinach, beets, chard, carrots, peas, turnips and radish. Continue to control weeds and amend your soil. Spring planting will be here before you know it!