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April 2022 Issue

Welcome to spring 2022! There are some great contributions in this issue of The Dirt. Enjoy!  
*Susan Ladwig and Ellen Mahany, The Dirt co-editors*

Great News! Patrons Can Borrow Gardening Kits At Largo Library

*By Anne Swain, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credits: Anne Swain*

The Largo Library added gardening kits for patrons to borrow at the end of 2020. The kits were a joint project between Librarian Hannah Duff and Adult Services Librarian Sarah Haney in response to the covid pandemic to help patrons with stress and anxiety. They also included meditation and birdwatching kits to the project.



An added incentive for a gardening kit was that Largo has a goal to provide opportunities for sustainability to the public and to increase green spaces that utilize native flora. The Largo Library has added a beautiful new butterfly garden which is NABA (North American Butterfly Association) certified. It uses mostly native Florida plants to attract native pollinators. It was one of the gardens featured on the Florida Botanical Gardens Foundation Tour of Public and Private Gardens. A photo is included.

The librarians enjoy gardening, especially sustainable Florida gardening, and researched what plants might survive on balconies in pots. This helped in putting together the gardening kit for others. The kits include a high-quality strong canvas bag with pockets filled with tools and two books on native plants and landscaping. The kit has one big scoop, one hand rake, one transplant tool, one trowel and one cultivator. The books are Native Florida Plants: Low Maintenance Landscaping and Gardening by Robert G. Haehle and Joan Brookwell and Florida's Best Landscape Plants: 200 Readily Available Species for Homeowners and Professionals by Gil Nelson.



The library has had a great response to the gardening kits, especially with people who have space to garden for the first time and with people who have just moved to Florida! The Largo Library is a great place for gardening resources or to just sit and enjoy a beautiful garden.



## Bye, Bye, Birdies

*By Rebekah Heppner, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credit: Rebekah Heppner.*

It's Christmas Day. Sunny and mild. I am on my screen porch talking to my sister on the phone when it happens. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Evil Cat as he takes off in the tell-tale way cats do when they catch something—head down, fast, with purpose. It's not like the way they run toward their food dishes when their people happen to walk toward the kitchen, and different from the quick run across the street this particular evil cat does when I clap my hands and yell "out!" every time I see him in my yard.

You may recall I had a [problem with squirrels](#) on my bird feeders. I decided I could live with that. This was something much worse. A predator.

I can't say for sure, but my gut tells me Evil Cat caught a finch. Those little guys like to come to the feeders in big groups and tend to make a racket. They usually stay in the trees nearby and take turns on the feeder but, occasionally, they check the ground for dropped seeds.

Okay, enough of the horror show. What do I do now? I love my birdies. We have been sharing coffee & seed in the morning and cocktails & seed in the evening for months now with no mishaps. At least none I witnessed.





What to do? I know that IFAS recommends we all [keep our cats indoors](#). It's better for them and for the wildlife. Cats kill billions of birds a year. Outdoor cats live an average of [2 to 5 years, compared to 10 to 15 years for indoor cats](#). I could just tell my neighbor this and she will keep him inside, right? I doubt it. She told me she "lost" her last cat when he didn't come home one night. And yes, she is aware of [the coyotes](#).

What else can I do? I considered kidnapping Evil Cat and taking him to someone who will give him a nice, safe 10-to-15-year-long life indoors. Not legal, but I'd be tempted if there wasn't another neighbor letting her two cats roam the neighborhood. I'd like to think I could report all three as nuisance animals to animal control. I looked up [the process](#). It's not as simple as See *Click Fix*.

As a responsible gardener, homeowner, and wildlife lover I can only find one right choice: remove the feeders. I can't in good conscience invite these beautiful creatures into my yard to be preyed upon. This means no noisy finch flocks attracting evil cats—and no cardinals for coffee or blue jay visits at happy hour. But I can now relax on the porch instead of being on constant vigil.

The birds still stop by. I have birdbaths, berries on native shrubs and lots of cover. [In Florida they should be able to find food from native plants and bushes year-round](#). And I'm getting off the porch more often now, visiting nearby parks and preserves in search of birds. We are lucky we live in a place with [so many places to watch birds and so many birds to watch](#).

So, it's bye, bye to birdies at my feeders—but not bye, bye to them being carried off by Evil Cat.

P.S. I know he's not really evil. He's just following his instincts. I love cats. People who let their cats roam outdoors, not so much.



*Cats are safest indoors (and the birds agree)*



## Master Gardeners Invent Fantastic Rain Gutter Watering System

By Linda Smock, Master Gardener Volunteer, Photo credits: Linda Smock

Teresa Cline, Gary Sawtelle, and Leslie Zambito, Master Gardener Volunteers, have created a clever watering system at Folly Farms using rain gutters. Their “Rain Gutter Plant Propagation System” allows them to grow cuttings without the need to hand-water each pot. Leslie Zambito recently explained this invention to me. The pictures illustrate how it works.

The first step in their process was preparing the rain gutters for the placement of the pots.

1. They began by cutting three-inch holes into the top of the gutters, allowing sufficient space between the gallon pots for plants to grow.
2. On the side of the rain gutter, below the three-inch hole, they drilled a small drainage hole to maintain a water level of about an inch, low enough so that there is airspace for the plants to absorb the water but not to sit in water.
3. They covered the ends of the gutters to keep the mosquitos from depositing eggs in the water.



Next, they prepared the pots.

1. They chose two one-gallon pots, placing one pot inside the other, to hold several cuttings.
2. Then, they drilled a three-inch hole in the bottom of each pot, matching the holes in the rain gutters.
3. After that, they placed a one-foot square of ground-cover cloth between the two pots, pushing the center of the cloth firmly through the hole to create a wick.





Finally, they added the cuttings.

1. They pushed the wick down three inches (to be able to absorb water inside the rain gutter) and filled each pot firmly packed moistened vermiculite.
2. Then, they pushed the cuttings firmly into the vermiculite.
3. Finally, they placed the pots on the rain gutters with the wick dropping through the holes to touch the water, in order to keep the vermiculite moist. allowing the plant to develop its root system. The gap between the pot and the water provides root aeration.



With the use of the rain gutters, replenishing water is easily done, either by applying hose water to the gutter spouts or any one of the three-inch holes. When I asked Leslie Zambito how the propagation process is working, she responded "It's fantastic." And "fantastic" describes this clever invention.

## Mighty Mini Native Blueberries

*By Susan Ladwig, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credits: Susan Ladwig*

I recently had my backyard landscaped to remove lots of invasive species that the previous owner had allowed to take over. I will NOT miss the incredibly messy moringa tree, or the ugly, insistent air potato vines. My landscaper used almost all Florida natives and now I have learned a whole new list of plants.



One of the most interesting additions is *Vaccinium darrowii*, the scrub blueberry. I never imagined a blueberry that could tolerate the Florida summer heat or produce berries without much of a cold period, but my blueberry bushes are covered with fruit as we speak (shhh, do not tell the birds).

According to the Florida Native Plant Society, *Vaccinium darrowii* is a small shrub, 2 feet by 2 feet, that spreads by rhizomes up to 50 feet. I guess I'd better keep an eye on that. They will take over the whole back bed. Right now they are a petite, polite size, and have very nicely colored leaves, light silvery green.

The blossoms are a light pinkish purple, and they attract lots of bees. I am sure the birds and squirrels will be thrilled once the fruit start to ripen.

The plants themselves like acidic soil, and lots of sun. They can be propagated through cuttings and division so once they are taking over the yard, I will likely have some to give away! I am looking forward to trying the berries, which ripen in late spring. They are very small berries compared to the grocery store variety.



*Vaccinium darrowii* bushes





## What's Buzzin' in the Garden?

By Ellen Mahany, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credits: Ellen Mahany.

Year-round, a buzzing sound surrounds the salt and pepper plant (*Melanthera nivea*) on my sunny patio in zone 10-A. It comes from honey bees and various species of native bees seeking sustenance on terminal blossoms formed from clusters of tiny, dense, nectar-filled disks.

Silent insect pollinators, including wasps and butterflies, join the crowd for their sweet reward. Lady bugs add their brightness to green leaves. A member of the aster family, the salt and pepper plant is also a host plant for the Florida white butterfly (*Appias drusilla*).

Also known as snow squarestem, cat's tongue and non-pareil, this fast-growing native wildflower thrives in zones eight through eleven. Full sun seems best but light shade also works. The salt-hued blossoms have a circumference of about a half-an-inch. The pepper color comes from the drying blossoms, which can be placed in a fabric bag to collect the seeds as they fall from the flower heads. See pictures below of pollinators attracted to this insect magnet.



Cassius blue (*Lepidopterous cassius*)



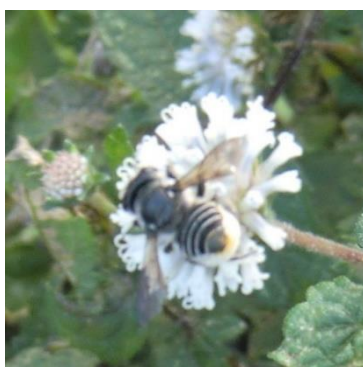
Striped Sweat Bee (*Agapostem sericeus*)



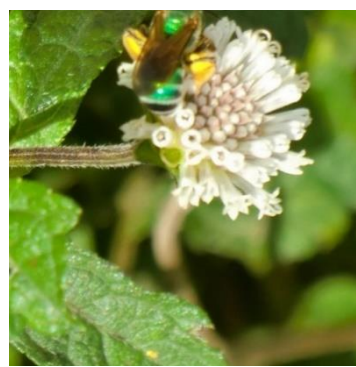
Horace's Duskywing (*Erynnis horatius*)



Carpenter Bee (*Xylocopa spp.*)



Leafcutter Bee (*Megachile sp.*)



Green Sweat Bee (*Augochlora pura*)





Honey Bee (*Apis*)



Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)



One of three lookalike wizards:  
*Fiery*, (*Hylephila phyleus*), *Sachem*  
(*Atalopedes campestris*) or  
*Whirlabout* (*Polites vibex*) *Skippers*

## Stars of the Garden Now Available Online

Check out [Butterflies of Pinellas County](https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/pinellas/lawn-and-garden/Butterfly-Stars-of-the-Garden.pdf) under the Lawn and Garden Section at the Pinellas County Extension Service website to view a seventy-page document providing information about sixty-some butterfly residents in our county. [Direct link:](https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/pinellas/lawn-and-garden/Butterfly-Stars-of-the-Garden.pdf)  
[https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/pinellas/lawn-and-garden/ Butterfly-Stars-of-the-Garden .pdf](https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/pinellas/lawn-and-garden/Butterfly-Stars-of-the-Garden.pdf)

## Florida Native Plants Were the Stars of the Show

*By Margaret Gates and Jan Rosser, Master Gardener Volunteers. Photo credit: Margaret Gates*

Thanks to the invaluable planning assistance of volunteer Master Gardener Volunteers and Theresa Badurek, MGCV coordinator, the recently held Florida Botanical Garden Foundation's (FBGF's) first annual Native Plant Symposium was an unqualified success! Additionally, Margaret Gates, MGCV, served as the steering committee chair for this all-day event.

The full schedule included two keynote speakers, Foundation docent-led native plant tours throughout the Florida Botanical Gardens, breakout sessions led by UF/IFAS specialists or Master Gardeners, and display tables hosted by member of various environmentally friendly organizations.

The first keynote speaker, charismatic James Stevenson, UF/IFAS Extension Specialist at Brooker Creek, spoke on the evolutionary development of Florida plants. The afternoon speaker, Stacey Matrazzo, executive director of Florida Wildlife Foundation (FWF), dazzled the crowd with her energy and infinite knowledge of Florida wildflowers.

Besides indoor time, there was ample outdoor time for participants to enjoy and experience the gardens. The docents led four different native plant tours. Breakout presenters used their outdoor classroom settings to present educational topics, featuring, of course, native plants.



Eco-Alley, the walkway leading to and from the auditorium, was set up with informational tables from environmental organizations. We were happy to host displays from FBGF, UF/IFAS, Florida Native Plant Society, Florida Wildflower Foundation, Pinellas Beekeepers Association, Keep Pinellas Beautiful, Friends of Florida Master Naturalists, St. Pete Garden Club and Clearwater Audubon Society.

This well- attended event attracted sixty-two participants. Among them were the Foundation's four invited guests, FBGF interns, all Eckerd College Students.

Participants shopped for native plants, local honey, and items from the Foundation's pop-up gift shop. A post-event questionnaire consisted of an overwhelming positive response to the event and many requests that the symposium be a regular event.

Participants were interested and engaged with the day's events. The weather cooperated to provide a perfect day to enjoy a delicious picnic lunch in an idyllic setting!



Friends of Pinellas Master Naturalists was one of several eco-friendly organizations offering information for attenders of the Native Plant Symposium held at the Florida Botanical Gardens.

## Self-Guided Native Tree Walk in the Aquatic Demonstration Area at the Florida Botanical Gardens

*Margaret Gates and Pam Schrader, Master Gardener Volunteers*

Want to take a self-guided tree walk around the scenic stormwater and aquatic demonstration area at FBG? Well, now you can! As a result of working on one of our latest projects at FBG - a replacement signage project in the area - we noticed how many Florida native trees exist there. Some were labeled and many were not, so we did the walk using apps to ID the trees, with



mixed results. Hmmmm. We then enlisted Urban Horticulture Agent Theresa Badurek for help with positive ID's and spent a very enjoyable morning with her as she used a key system to identify questionable trees.

Using a grant from Tampa Bay Water, we had the smallish signs made, each with its own QR code. Scan the code with a smart phone and you will be directed to a UF/IFAS page that tells all about that particular tree. The signs were made small on purpose so as not to overwhelm the lovely natural setting. The camera on most smart phones can be used to scan the QR code – unless your phone is very old. If that is the case you will have to download an app to scan.

So, if you feel like taking a tree walk, you now know where to go. Scan as many or as few as you wish, and please give us feedback of any problems/errors along the way. While you are there, read the new signage along the way and look for critters in the pond such as alligators, turtles, and several species of water birds.

By the way, we were told by quite a few people that Andy (famous help-desk Andy Wilson) was responsible for planting many of the trees!





## Growing Pumpkins

*Siobhan Boyd, Master Gardener Volunteer. All photo credits Siobhan Boyd.*

Spring has sprung in Florida! Gardens are full of blossoms and color and buzzing with bees and birds. It is my favorite time of year. My orchids are in full bloom, my brugmansia are bent over with the weight of their blooms and in the evening, my yard is intoxicating with the fragrance of flowers.



One of my absolute favorites is my pumpkin plants. Every year after Halloween, I bury my pumpkins in my garden. I have two small gardens in the front of my house where I display the pumpkins and that is where I bury them. I dig a hole just deep enough to cover the rotting pumpkin with a couple of inches of soil. I do this for two reasons: it's hard to clean up a rotting pumpkin (and it's kind of gross) and by burying the pumpkin in the soil, I am adding organic matter back to the soil. That was why I initially started burying my pumpkins but now I have another reason. They grow and spring up this time of the year!

The first year, I had no idea what I was doing and the pumpkin vine grew into my neighbor's sea grape. I didn't notice until June when I looked way up and saw a couple of small pumpkins growing amongst the sea grapes. Oops! The following year, I was a little more savvy and controlled the vines better and did some research on pumpkins and their benefits.

Zucchini, squash, courgette, and pumpkin flowers are all members of the gourd family (*Cucurbitaceae*). With a sweet and mild flavor, pumpkin flowers can be used in various ways such as condiment and soup ingredient. They are delicious in salads or stuffed. When choosing them for cooking purposes make sure to use the male pumpkin flower as the female flowers have a small pumpkin fruit growing at the base of it. With a rich source of vitamin B9, pumpkin flowers are known to be full of health benefits. From enhancing immunity and treating common cold to making strong bones and improving vision, pumpkin flowers are known to be super-healthy.



Since I don't have the space to grow a pumpkin patch, I harvest the flowers. There are several different ways to prepare pumpkin flowers including deep frying, adding to salads, boiling and stuffing them. I like to stuff them and serve as an hors d'oeuvres. However you prepare them, pumpkins are a fun, easy addition to a spring garden.

### Stuffed Pumpkin Flowers

5 pumpkin blossoms (washed with stamen removed)  
4 ounces of cream cheese  
2 slices of bacon crumbled  
1/2 teaspoon garlic and herb seasoning or garlic powder

Mix all ingredients in a bowl. Fill blossom and twist closed. Chill for about an hour. Serve with Melba toast or on a salad.



## Container Gardening Produces Tasty Tomatoes

By Jay Gould, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credits: Jay Gould



Whether you have a home with a large yard, a villa with a courtyard, a condo with a sunny balcony or a snowbird's temporary garden, you can grow fantastic tasting tomatoes in containers. I have had great success based on the following directions.

**Selecting the right variety is a KEY step.** Consider the characteristics of each to choose one appropriate for your garden and your cuisine. **'Better Boy'** is a large, slicing variety, both disease and wilt resistance. Although this big plant is a slow grower, it produces the most fruit of



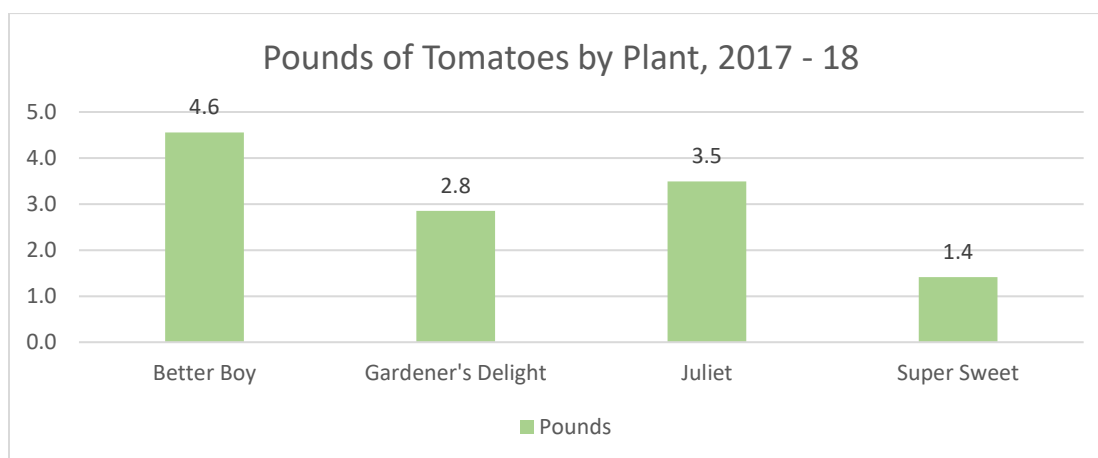
any of the varieties. 'Juliet', a medium-sized Roma, fruits heavily. 'Gardener's Delight', great for salads, is a smaller fruit, slightly bigger than a ping-pong ball. This variety is also available as 'Super Sweet', an excellent cherry tomato. You may decide to use a variety of plants for different purposes.

**Next, decide whether you prefer seeds or plants.** Seeds for all these varieties are available at nurseries and big box stores. Growing from seeds should not be intimidating, but you may want to grow only a few plants. In that case, individual plants would be more practical. Call your local nursery for seedlings since the big box stores probably won't carry all these varieties.

**Now, select your plants' forever home.** You will need a very sunny spot, so no balconies facing north, but that south-facing garage pathway could be the perfect place. (A plus with container gardening is that with some effort you can move a well-established plant to a more suitable location, but I don't recommend it.) Tomatoes are big plants and need big spaces. Go for at least a 15-gallon container. This will be about 18" wide at the top and 17" deep with tapering sides. A 20 gallon is even better but is too heavy to be moved.

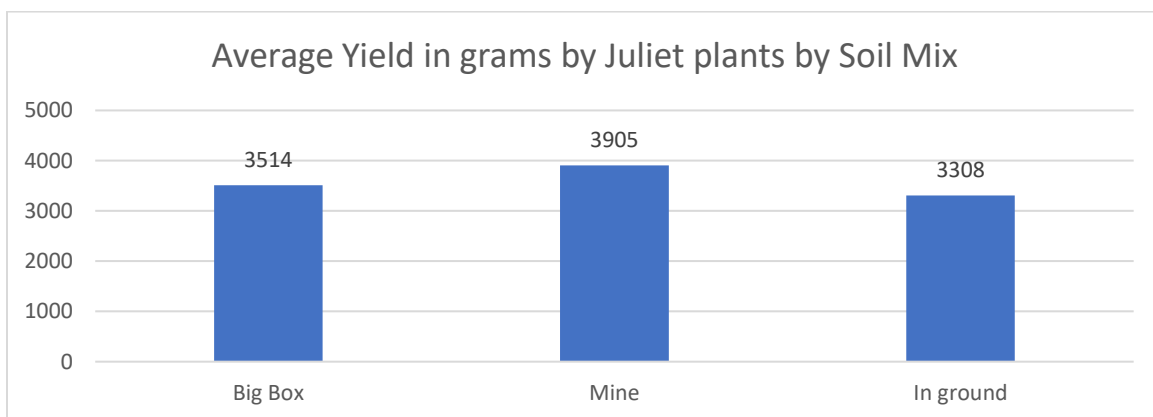
**Choose nourishing soil.** Bags of compost, raised-bed soil and topsoil are labeled in cubic feet, not gallons. To convert a 15-gallon container to cubic feet, multiply each gallon by .1337. Fifteen gallons equals 2 cubic feet. Buy two bags containing one cubic foot each. Mix a bag of super good soil like compost with a bag of average soil like topsoil to avoid too rich a mix. In his book *All New Square Food Garden, Grow More in Less Space*, Mel Bartholomew recommends "Mel's Mix," a three-part mix of compost, peat moss, and vermiculite. I've substituted pine chips or other small organic fibers for the peat moss and charcoal for the vermiculite. You can't go wrong with his original mix.

**At last, you are ready to add your soil mix, add your plant, water well and regularly and patiently monitor the growth.** Consult my Excel spread sheets for specific information about my results with each tomato variety. I recorded pot size, soil mix, plant variety, plant events, number and size of fruit and location.



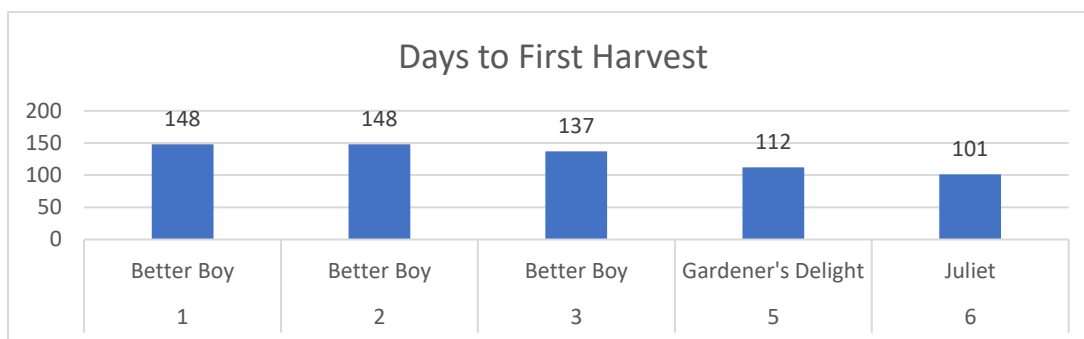
All plants were in containers and the number of plants were limited. Based on these results, the next season, I planted more Juliet plants, some in containers and some in the ground in three different potting mixes.



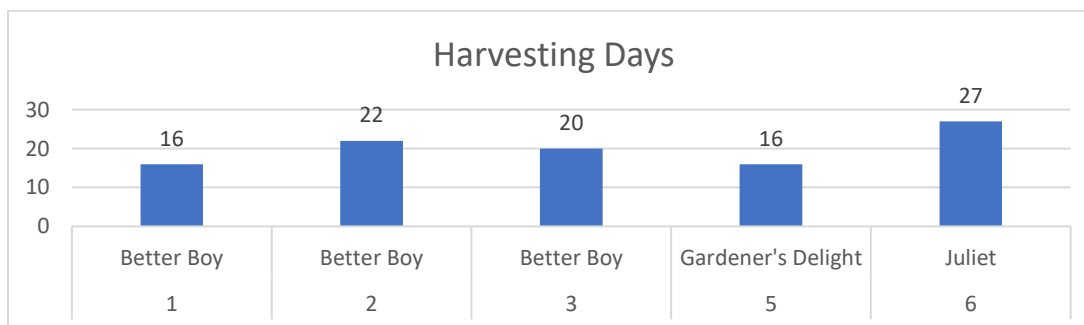


Here are the results for the Juliet plants for fall 2019, spring 2020. You may wonder why the results are in grams not pounds and ounces. Translating pounds into ounces isn't easy since Excel will give you a percentage of a pound like .25 pounds, not 4 ounces when you convert the grams into pounds.

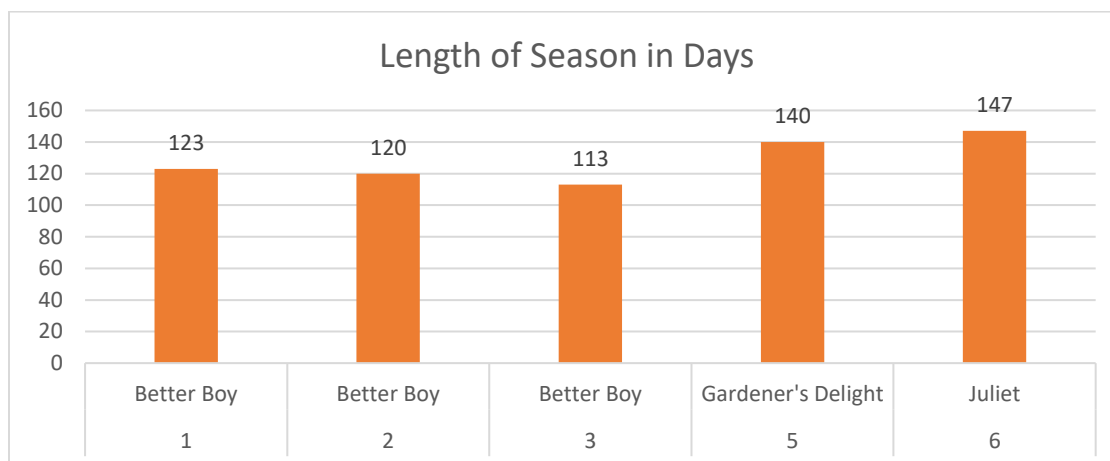
But knowing how many grams, ounces, or pounds produced by a plant doesn't answer the most frequent question: "How long do I have to wait for the first tomato?" Here are the answers for one season.



Another good question is, "How often will I be able to harvest"?



Lastly, you might want to know when you will run out of fresh tomatoes. How long is the harvesting season?



## Tell us About your Project!

We the editors of *The Dirt* want to spotlight Master Gardener projects so everyone can hear about them. If you are working on a project you would like to share, please let us know. We can help write an article through an interview process. The goal is to highlight the great work our volunteers are doing in the community. Reach out to us using the email below. Thank you!

## Submit Your Articles and Pictures to The Dirt

*The Dirt* is published January, April, June, and October for Master Gardeners by Master Gardeners. The deadline for the next issue is June 6, 2022. If you would like to submit an article or photo feature, see the following guidelines:

- Articles should be 250 to 300 words.
- The topic can be anything you would like to share to educate your fellow gardeners.
- You may send pictures, poetry, or garden-related articles.
- Submit only Word documents, not PDF, so that edits are possible.
- Send tips or information about a community or Master Gardener project for a potential article.
- Send photos as attachments and include proper attribution.
- Send submissions to Susan Ladwig at [ladwig.susan@gmail.com](mailto:ladwig.susan@gmail.com)

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