

SUMMER LOVIN'

The best crops, flowers and more to plant over warmer weather, as well as tips to keep your garden thriving.

Words **KAREN BURGE**

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There's something about a warm summer's day that draws you outside and into the garden. Whether it's tending to summer blooms, snipping fresh herbs or harvesting sun-ripened fruits, there are plenty of ways for gardeners to make the most of the warm weather.

While every month brings a buzz to *Gardening Australia* presenter and horticulturalist Millie Ross, summertime is especially joyful. There's always so much to do, and it's a wonderful time of year to be outside, she explains. "It's also a really intellectual time in the garden."

As a productive gardener living in a cool, elevated region of central Victoria, summertime is the main window for growing food, and it's often short-lived.

"You really only get one shot because in the cooler months, the brakes go on," says Millie.

Summer is longer and hotter in the subtropical climate of Lismore, NSW, home to horticulturalist and gardening educator Phil Dudman. And it's a season he finds easy to love. "Everything's well grown, full-sized, happy and thriving. There are lots of bright-coloured flowers around and the days are long, so despite it being a little hot, it's a great time to get things done or just

enjoy being outside in your patch or among your flowers."

And there are plenty of plants with a lot to give when the weather warms.

TOP CROPS

Tomato, cucumber and lettuce are garden staples that will deliver an abundance of tasty ingredients for fresh salads. As summer heats up, you can create shade with basic netting to protect them, Millie suggests, as well as considering heat-resistant varieties where possible. She likes to grow an old-fashioned variety of lettuce called black seeded simpson, which tolerates heat well.

In her summer garden, she also grows radish, which can be planted continually all season, and beans (both climbing and bush beans). "Beans are one of my ultimate crops. You can put them in, and they'll be very productive, very quickly. They're particularly good for small gardens, too."

Another favourite is beetroot. "It really doesn't feel like summer until you eat a beetroot," Millie says. "There's a variety I love that comes from a part of Italy called Chioggia, and you'll know it as being the red and white striped beetroot. It's really beautiful and I think it's almost the sweetest variety you can grow."



YELLOW KANGAROO PAW



CHIOGGIA BEETROOT



PURPLE EGGPLANT



DINNER PLATE DAHLIA

FOR WARMER CONDITIONS

In Phil's garden, eggplant is one of his best summer providers. Other high achievers in the patch include zucchini, sweet corn, tomato, cucumber and ginger.

"Eggplant comes into its own in the summer. You plant them in spring and by summer they're well established and highly productive. Zucchini's are also prolific, and they're a wonderful, versatile vegetable," Phil says. "Sweet corn also loves the heat and, particularly in my area when it starts to get rainy [in late summer], it just thrives."

If you end up with an abundance of produce, Phil has a few tips. "We process a lot of sweet corn by removing all the kernels and freezing them, so throughout the year we have this lovely homegrown, organic sweet corn that was picked fresh and frozen almost immediately. I also get right into making pickles and preserving vegetables where I can, because it's lovely to enjoy them in the cooler months."

BEST BLOOMS

There are many stand-out flowers that take well to summer heat and add life and colour to the garden. Hardy zinnias are a great choice for a bright pop of colour, as well big and bold dahlias, which offer long-lasting flowers and come in an array of shapes, colours and sizes. "Because dahlias have that solid tuber root system that they store a lot of energy in, they're quite dry-tolerant. So, dahlias are a pretty good option for late-summer gardens," Millie explains.

An Australian native plant with striking summer flowers is kangaroo paw. “They’re such amazing, rewarding plants. Put a pot or handful of kangaroo paw in the garden where you can see them from inside, and you’re guaranteed to have birds visiting,” says Millie. “I always say, if you can get in a bird bath and some kangaroo paws, you don’t need television all summer!” Your local native plant nursery can recommend the best varieties for your region.

Reliable and resilient, salvias are another top pick and a magnet for pollinators, says Phil. “Some are bushy, some are quite low-growing and some grow on tall spikes – there’s an incredible range and they are pretty good in the heat.”

If you live in a warm climate, sunflowers are hard to resist for a cheerful summer display. “They just erupt out of the ground and up they go. This is one of the beauties of summer – things that like the heat grow quickly, and every day your garden is looking different.”

Other summer blooms you’ll find in Phil’s garden include marigolds, rudbeckias and agastache.

TIME FOR AN EDIT

While summer flowers bring excitement, also think about the foliage holding your garden’s visual appeal in the cooler months, like ground covers, grasses, shrubs and trees. “The more foliage and evergreen lush stuff you can have in a garden, the more benefit it will have over the long term,” Millie says.

You should also explore what’s working and what isn’t. It might be time to put in a few containers for growing food, create more shade or shift your focus to long-term planting that you don’t have to tend to as much, she suggests.

“If it’s a chore and it’s stressful, then it’s probably not quite working, so think about how you can enjoy the garden. If that involves making some changes, or simplifying areas to make things easier, then it’s a good time of year to do that.” ●

SUMMER GARDEN PREP

With MILLIE ROSS



Pots: Any plants that need more room can be put in pots. If they’re borderline for potting and you don’t do it, your plant will frequently dry out by mid-summer. You can also give pot plants a deep soak if needed and add mulch.

Prune: After harvesting fruit, you can prune fruit trees for shape and to control height. Prune tomato plants by removing side shoots and any lower branches dragging on the ground.

Water: Give plants water in the cooler morning or in the evening. If it’s going to rain, you can aerate or fork the soil to ensure water can penetrate and work its way in.

Shade: Think about shade options to keep plants cool or move pots into more protected positions.

Plan: Consider what to plant next to keep seasonal momentum in your garden.

HEALTHY EDIBLES

You don’t need a lot of space to enjoy fresh and healthy produce. These five easy-to-grow ingredients will thrive in containers and have health benefits that are too good to ignore.



Parsley

The herb adds flavour to cooking and fresh salads, and contains a high level of vitamin K, which is important for healthy bones and normal blood clotting function.



Leafy greens

Eating just one cup of nitrate-rich vegetables each day may significantly reduce your risk of heart disease, research at Australia’s Edith Cowan University finds.



Oregano

A great alternative to salt in cooking, a tablespoon of fresh oregano contains the same antioxidant activity as a medium-sized apple.



Green beans

A good source of fibre (which can help lower ‘bad’ cholesterol levels) as well as antioxidants to fight free radicals in the body.



Tomatoes

The cooking all-rounder is rich in lycopene, an antioxidant that might help protect the body from cell damage.

