
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 101 Organic Gardening Q&A

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/101

- Theresa Loe: This is the Living Homegrown Podcast. Episode number 101.
- Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast, where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host national PBS TV producer and canning expert, Theresa Loe.
- Theresa Loe: Hey there everybody. Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast. I'm your host Theresa Loe, and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm. That means preserving, fermenting, small-space food growing, and just taking small steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. All the different ways that you can live closer to your food, even if you have little or no garden space at all. Now if you want to learn more about any of these topics, you can visit my website, livinghomegrown.com.

Today's episode is a Q&A episode. I got a ton of questions recently, and I noticed that several of them were following the same theme. In other words, I was getting kind of the same question asked in different ways. So I pulled together some of the questions that were very similar. I'm going to just dive right in and ask the question, and then give my answer because these were all kind of garden related. And I thought well perfect timing, because here we are in June and a lot of you are really diving into your food gardens. So hopefully some of these questions will help you out.

One of the questions that came in repeatedly was several people wrote in and asked about old seed. And that makes perfect sense, because you are probably planting your garden, or you have been planting different crops maybe in your backyard over the last month or two. And you may have pulled or dove into some of the seed that you had from previous years. I know that's what I do. Before I go buy new seed, I kind of go through and see, well what got left over. Especially because we have small backyards, we tend to not plant the entire packet when we bought something.

The packets, unless it's a really rare or unusual seed, where they only give you a few seeds in that packet, most of the time it gives you way more than you need when you just have a little backyard. Especially if it's something like zucchini. You really only need to plant two or three at the most, and

you might have 30 or 40 seeds in that pack.

So what do you do when you have these leftover seeds? And then the next year you are looking at those, and you're thinking, well are they still good? Because when you read the seed packet it always says, "best if used by" and then it gives you a date. But the truth is that most seeds will last well beyond that date. That date that is on the seed packet is really because the seed company wants to ensure that you get the best results. And of course they want you to buy new seed every year so that you get premium results, and you'll have most of the seed will germinate for you.

But the truth is that it usually lasts many years past that date. Especially if you've stored it really well. It hasn't gotten too hot. It hasn't gotten any moisture. You've kept it out of the sun. Well all of those things will make it so that the seed is still good. But if you have some seed, and either you don't know how old it is, it could be five or six years old, or you're just a little unsure if you want to invest the time in planting it because you don't want to plant it and have it not come up.

What you can do with that old seed, is you can do a germination test. And this was fresh on my mind anyway because I just did a germination test of some wheat that we had grown, I guess it was two years ago. We grew some wheat and saved the seed to plant again, and I didn't plant it last year. So I had stored it, but I was a little worried before I plant a whole section of wheat in my backyard, because it's going to take up most of my garden. I didn't want to go to all that trouble and just have a little bit of it come up and the rest not work. So I did a germination test. So let me tell you how you do it, because it's so easy and so fast.

What I recommend you do is you take just 10 seeds out of that packet. Now if the packet only has 10 seeds, then just go ahead and plant them and just see what happens. But in most cases you have 30 or 40 or 50 seeds. In my case I had like a pound of seed. So I just pulled out 10 seeds, and I placed those seeds on a wet paper towel. I just lined them up on just a damp piece of paper towel, and I have that paper towel on a plate. And then I fold the paper towel over so that those seeds are completely covered and very, very wet. Then I just take a piece of cellophane or saran-wrap, and I cover up the paper towel so that it will stay moist.

Then I just sat that paper towel over into a warm area like on top of your refrigerator is good. Where I like to place mine is on top of our cable box, because it is always warm. So I set it on top of the cable box, and I start checking it after about 48 hours. I start checking it every day to see if it sprouts.

Now the reason I pick 10 seeds is because it's really easy to see what your

germination rate is. So let's say half of those seeds sprout, and the other half nothing happens. So you have a 50% germination rate. Or if eight of them sprout, then you have an 80% germination rate. It's real easy if you've used 10 seeds. If your seeds are anywhere from 40, 50, or 60 percent germination rate, I would still use the seeds, but I would plant a little heavier. So in other words if the packets says to plant every four inches. I would probably double that, so that I'm getting a little bit more of a chance of everything coming in really thickly.

Or if the seed is below 40%, you might want to rethink getting some fresh seed instead of using the older seed. Now if it's above 60%, if you have six, seven, eight, nine or 10 seeds that sprouted, then by all means plant those seeds and go to town, and you should have no problems with the seed. So that's what I always do with my old, old seed. If it's something where I'm only going to be planting a few, you know like zucchini, I can tell pretty quickly if it's gonna be working. So I'll plant it. If nothing happens after a week, then I'll buy a new pack, so that's usually how I do it.

But that's a great way for you to test your old seed. So you have old seed, and you're not sure if it's still good. Do a germination test. It just takes a few days, and you can tell right away if it's gonna work for you or not.

So the second question that I got is from Sue, and she wants to know if I feed my plants, and if so, what do I feed my plants with? So I'm assuming, Sue, that you're talking about feeding my vegetables and my herbs. And you're talking about during the growing season. So, I actually don't feed my plants. I feel like I feed my soil. I work on my soil all the time, not so much feeding my plants. You know like, I'm an organic gardener, so I'm not going to be using something like Miracle Grow, which you spray on your plants or you water the plants with something like Miracle Grow, which is a synthetic fertilizer. I don't do that.

But what I do do, is I'm always working on building my soil and making it as nutritious as possible for my plants. I do that in a couple of different ways. First of all, I am a big compost girl. So I'm always composting, and I add that compost to my soil in the form of mulch, but I especially use it right at the beginning of Springtime, right at the beginning of my major growing season. I lay down a really nice layer of compost on top of my soil. And I'm always working at getting more compost. Sometimes, I have to buy it. But most of the time I'm trying to use what I'm making myself.

So I'm always mulching with compost, that's number one, but especially at the beginning of the season. When I do feel like I need to quote/unquote feed or I'm noticing, it's usually like my roses or something that's a flowering plant that maybe looks a little peaked. What I will use is fish emulsion, which again, I really feel I'm feeding the soil. Because fish

emulsion, it's a natural byproduct from the fish market. It's something that would get thrown away otherwise. It stinks to high heaven, so I'll warn you about that right now. It does smell just like you would think it would smell.

But it has a lot of micronutrients, and I find that when something like my roses are looking peaked, it's the micronutrients that they really need. But fish emulsion also contains a really nice supply of NPK, which is the three main fertilizing nutrients that you'll see on a package of fertilizer. So "N" stands for nitrogen, "P" stands for phosphorus, and "K" stands for potassium. And they each do different things. Nitrogen for example, really works on greening up something and making new leaves. Some of those nutrients work on the root system. They all do different things. But you want to have kind of a balance.

But what's nice about fish emulsion is that although it has kind of a nice balance of those three nutrients, and each brand is a little different, each fish emulsion brand is a little different on the numbers. On all of them, it's a very small number. So you know how with synthetic fertilizers, it'll say something like, 30, 10, 15 as the numbers for NPK. You really don't want those numbers that high. That's not natural for the plants, and the plant is not gonna absorb all of that. It just can't.

So what happens when you use something like a synthetic fertilizer with really high numbers, yeah it kind of blasts the plant a little bit. You'll get some very rapid growth right off the bat. Usually it brings in insects, because the plant is growing so fast that it kind of stresses the immune system of the plant. But the biggest problem is that most of those nutrients are just washed through the soil, and that synthetic chemical then ends up in the water table below. So it's not really the way to go.

If you want to be an organic gardener, you want to always be adding organic matter and organic liquid fertilizer if you're going to do that. You know like compost tea, that sort of thing. You always want to be adding it to the soil in very small amounts so that you're not upsetting the balance, if that makes sense. What I like about fish emulsion, is that it has these micronutrients, which usually does boost and help the plant, but it doesn't zap everything. So to answer your question, all I do for feeding my plants so to speak, is to feed the soil with compost and if I see a plant that needs a little extra, I will do fish emulsion.

Now the only other time that I might add something is if I have a potted plant that I know because it's in a pot, it has lost a lot of its nutrients. And so I end up feeding the potted plants or container plants a little bit differently. For example, my blueberries are in pots, and I am always adding cottonseed meal to my containers to keep the acidity up. So there's always something that I'm doing to my container plants because they wash

out the nutrients. But I'm always using organic things when I'm adding to the container. So I hope that makes sense. All right.

Another question that I got was from David who wanted to know if I ever do cover crops. That's a great question because I garden on one-tenth of an acre. So I have a very, very tiny garden, and I have done some cover crops before. Cover cropping is a great practice for organic gardeners, because what it means, or if you don't know what a cover crop is, it's where you're planting something that you fully intend to just till into the soil as green manure. In other words, you're going to plant it, let it grow just until it flowers or just before it flowers, but it's usually best if you let it flower. You don't want it to go to seed, but you till it in before it goes to seed, and then it is allowed to break down in the soil like a green compost or green manure. And it adds nutrients back into the soil.

So it's always a great thing to do. It's something that organic farmers do on a large scale, but usually people who have smaller backyards like I do, don't think of it as a possibility. But you absolutely can do cover cropping in just little small batches, whenever you have an area that is not being used. That's actually when I've done it. There are a ton of different things that you can grow as a cover crop, and I'm not going to go into all the different things because I really am not knowledgeable on what works for different people's areas. It has a lot to do with climate, and what you're looking for, what you want to get out of the cover crop. Because each cover crop has different things that it's adding back to the soil, or different benefits.

One of the things that I like to use a cover crop for is for weed control, but if you had a hillside, you might want a cover crop that will prevent erosion through the rainy season. So there's lots of different ones. However, in the show notes for this episode, I will link to a really handy cover crop chart that is on the internet, that I think you'll really find it helpful. So to get to the show notes. You'll go to livinghomegrown.com/101, and I'll have that link inside the show notes for this episode.

You might be wondering, well what did I use when I did a cover crop. Well what I planted was a buckwheat crop. And I just thought it would be fun because I had a section of my garden that was done at the end of summer, and I knew I wasn't going to be planting anything there for a while, and I thought I would try cover cropping. So I planted buckwheat. In my area you can plant a cover crop like that in September or October, and it grows really rapidly. It covers the area and prevents weeds from coming up, so that's what I planted. Some people like to plant legumes, because that helps with nitrogen going forward. Some people like to plant rye. There are different crops that you can plant for summer cover crops or winter cover crops. And if you live where there's snow, you can plant the cover crop before your first frost and then in the springtime when things warm up,

you can make sure it gets tilled in.

So when I planted the buckwheat, I planted it, it grew really fast. Then I let it go to flower, and then I cut it down. And once you cut it down, you have a couple of different options. You can cut it down and put it into your compost, and then add the compost back to the garden. Or you could use a weed-eater and cut it up into little pieces. Start at the top and keep cutting it lower and lower so you have little pieces, and let those pieces sit on top of the soil for several weeks and then till them in. Or you can rototill it in. I don't usually, in fact I don't at all rototill my garden here in Los Angeles, because first of all it's very, very tiny. But I try not to disturb the soil that much. But that is an option that some people like to do. They plant their cover crop and then they rototill it in, or mow it down and hand-till it in. So there's a lot of different options.

But the most important thing is that once it's been cut down, you want to wait at least three weeks. I think for me, I think I waited maybe it was four or five weeks before I planted anything else, because I wanted to give the cover crop a chance to start breaking down. It does tend to fix the nitrogen for a while, until it starts breaking down and re-releasing that nitrogen back. So you want to give it some time before you start planting your next crop. But by using a green manure, you are adding a ton of organic matter back to the soil in a very natural way, and then it continues to break down, all the microbes are working on it, and then you plant your next crop, and it's even healthier. Your soil is even healthier than it was before.

So don't think that just because you have a small garden, you can't do a cover crop. If you have a certain area that you know you're done for the season, and you don't really want to start another crop before winter, then get a package of cover crop seed. I'll have some links for some sources in the show notes. Get yourself a cover crop and plant that little area, and then just till it in or cut it down and let it sit down on top of the soil as a mulch until you're ready to plant again.

Okay, another question that came in actually from several people was that they were curious about little circle bites that were in their rose leaves. So I'm so glad that I got this question. If you grow roses, and you ever are out picking your roses, or you're watering and you notice little half-moon circles cut out like in a perfect circle in the leaves of the roses. Don't panic. Don't spray any insecticide. That is a leaf cutter bee. They are really good pollinators, and you absolutely do not want to spray or discourage them because they are pollinating your garden. And if you're growing vegetables, you want those in there. Even if you're not growing vegetables, we want those leaf cutter bees.

Now I have a lot of roses, and I do get a lot of damage from some leaf

cutter bees, and I would never dream of spraying anything to discourage them. They are not hurting your roses. It's completely cosmetic only. You still get the rose flower, it's just the leaves that get those circles cut out of them. And what they're doing with those circles, they're not eating your leaves. What they're doing is they are cutting out those circles, and they use them for their nest. They are laying eggs and then plugging up the holes with these little pieces of the leaf. So you don't want to discourage it at all.

I know that there are some roses, I don't know why they ... In my backyard there's just a couple certain roses that they just love. Maybe the leaves are cut really easily or something. But there are a couple of roses that get a lot of damage, and the roses themselves are fine. It's just the rose leaves have these little circles. And I get really excited when I see them, because then I know they're out there pollinating all my vegetables and my other flowers.

So I'm so glad that you guys asked about that. I actually have a whole episode on mason bees, and leaf cutter bees are very similar. They might even be in the same class of bees, I'm not sure. But I have an episode on mason bees where I had the owner of Crown Bees on to talk about this. So I will link to that in the show notes as well.

Okay, this one's from Nikki and she was asking, "What are your favorite herbs for containers. I want to start growing containers on my sunny patio, but I'm not sure which ones do best inside a container." Okay Nikki, actually just about any herb does great in containers. Herbs love containers because most herbs are very Mediterranean. They like dryer feet. They don't like to be soaked and wet. And the biggest problem with container gardening is usually that people forget to water. And that's why herbs do so well, because they can handle that very well. The only herb that really likes to get more wet than other herbs are mints. So if you grow mint, make sure you water it. But otherwise, most of the other herbs can be really dry in between your watering. So they all do great in containers.

If I were to just pick a few herbs that I would grow in containers, I definitely would grow mint. Mint has to be in a container, because if you plant it in your garden, it's a little invasive. It has little runners that run either just over the soil or under the soil. So they end up spreading all over the place. So don't grow mint in the garden. Grow your mint in a container, and that goes for peppermint, spearmint, any type of mint. That would be my first one that I would definitely say grow in a container.

But the other one that I love to grow in a container is an ornamental oregano called Kent Beauty, and I will put a link in the show notes where you can get that particular oregano. It is not a culinary herb, but I use it for flower arranging, because it drapes over the side of the containers, and it

has these beautiful flowers, and I think you would just love it. If you grew it in a container, you kind of can grow it towards the front, and it will make a mound and then spill out over the side. And it's quite lovely.

Another herb that is great in a container are all the different types of basil. And the reason I like to grow basil in containers, is because here at least in Los Angeles, I have quite a slug problem with basil. I think it must be the scent. It just draws them from anywhere. And if I have basil in my garden, the slugs will find it. But if I grow it in a container, I can control the slugs a little bit better. I'll go out and handpick, or I will use a half of an orange, or a half of a grapefruit upside down in the container. Then in the morning, I go out the next day, and I'll lift that up and any slugs that had gotten into the container will go inside that orange or that grapefruit. They're kind of attracted to that, and I can dump them into the trash. So they're very easy to catch when they're in a container.

So I grow a lot of basil in containers, plus they just look quite beautiful. And I usually grow them alongside some nasturtiums. So I'll plant a couple of basil, and then I have a packet of nasturtium seeds, and I'll just poke in a few nasturtium seeds into the container. And those will spill out over the sides and they look quite beautiful together. So any one of those herbs would be great to start, but honestly you can grow anything. You can grow sage, rosemary, thyme, just about any herb you want will do great in a container.

Okay, so this last question is from Suzanne, and she wanted to know, "Theresa, what is the most unusual thing you have grown in your backyard?" Okay, well I guess what I would tell you is what is the most unusual thing I have growing right now. Right now, I have some coffee. I'm growing coffee, and I don't intend in any way, shape, or form to be harvesting and roasting this coffee. But I thought it would be fun to grow the coffee plant. I have two, and so far I have not gotten a coffee bean off of them, but they're both very small. And it's just kind of a conversation piece. I think it's kind of fun to grow. I have both of them in containers on my patio, and that's kind of a fun thing to grow. So I'm growing some coffee. I'll let you know if I get a coffee bean. So far I don't have one.

Another thing that I'm growing is allspice. And the allspice is really fun. It has an incredibly fragrant leaf. It's a tropical plant, so it would not grow everywhere. If you wanted to grow it, you'd probably have to grow it in a greenhouse. But here in Los Angeles it does really well. It's probably a three or four foot tall tree/bush that I have growing in a large container on my patio. And with allspice, it's the seed of the plant that we use as allspice. And I don't have two allspices, so I will not get a seed. I have to have a male and female, and I only have one plant right now. But the leaves smell incredible, and the leaves actually have the allspice fragrance. So I love to

use this in potpourri. I also will pick it sometimes for a flower arrangement. But if I just want to add fragrance to my house, I will pick one or two leaves, crunch them up, add them to a little pot of boiling water on my stove, and they will add the allspice fragrance all through my home. So it's kind of a fun one to grow.

Another thing that we have growing all over in our backyard is pineapple. Pineapple grows really well here in Los Angeles, and I've grown most of my pineapple in containers. I've never gotten a super large pineapple. Most of them have ended up to be quite small, and I think part of that is because I grow them in containers. Also, they need a lot of water, and we've been in a drought. But it was something that I started growing when my boys were very little. They just got a big kick out of growing pineapples. So we still have some growing now. Every once in a while we'll get a pineapple will come shooting off of it, and it's kind of fun.

One of the other things that I've grown that my kids really loved was growing peanuts. Peanuts are kind of interesting if you ever can get ahold of a peanut plant, because the peanuts appear underground. You know it's not like you get a peanut tree. The peanuts are actually under the ground of the plant. And that's kind of fun if you have kids. So that's about it right now. Those are probably the most unusual things I have though. But I think my favorite is the allspice. I've had that allspice for several, several years, many years, and I just love it. It's one of my favorite plants to walk by and touch the leaves because it smells so fantastic.

So that's it for this week, I just wanted to answer some of these questions. They were all kind of garden related, so I thought that they would fit well together. If you have a question that you would like to see answered on one of the podcasts, just go to livinghomegrown.com and go to the contact page, and you can send me a question there. I can't answer everybody's questions individually, I just get way too many questions. But the questions that you guys send me, I do directly use either for the podcast episodes, but also if there are things that you want to see featured on our PBS show Growing a Greener World, by all means let me know because we are always keeping a bucket list of what things people are requesting, or what ideas we have for future episodes. Or for future episodes of this podcast.

So thank you so much for joining me here today. I really appreciate you taking the time to listen, and until next time just try to live a little more local, seasonal, and homegrown. Take care.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown Podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide, and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown Podcast.