



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

The Garden in July---I'm still planting!

Kevin Milaeger

We had a few too many pepper plants here at the greenhouse so I planted about sixty of them in the garden on July 2nd. (I had room for twice that number, but I wanted to save room for late summer radishes and spinach.) Peppers are usually planted about a month ago, but I figured what the heck... I planted them close together, knowing peppers tolerate (and possibly thrive) with overcrowding. The variety called 'Carmen,' a bull's horn type, already had fruit on most of the plants. 'Red Knight,' a bell pepper, had no fruit, but was flowering.



Peppers planted July 2nd

All peppers change color when they are fully ripe---most of the sweet ones turn red. You can eat them at any stage of maturity, but the sweet peppers will be sweetest and most nutritious after they have turned red. Nevertheless, I pick the first peppers of the season when they are still green. Remember, the goal of the plant is to reproduce. Once the plant has reached that goal, it blooms



Kale 'Dwarf Curly Blue'

less, because its goal has been met. That is why I pick the early fruit before it is completely ripe (still green)---I want the plant to "think" that its goal of reproduction was not achieved, so it produces more flowers, in hopes of bearing more seed carrying fruit.

After I planted the peppers, I still had more space in the garden, so I decided to try some of the "heat tolerant" lettuces. In general, lettuces don't like hot weather, but there are degrees of tolerance.

When lettuce experiences too much heat, it "bolts." That means that it goes to seed. As the plant grows, and you have perhaps been picking the tasty leaves for a few weeks, the weather eventually warms and the plant sends up a stalk (18" or so) that ends in flowers. While this change is happening, the flavor of the lettuce changes, turning bitter---inedible for most folks. Some seed companies tout "heat tolerant" lettuce. Their



catalogs often say something like "with careful planning you can have lettuce all summer long." That gives them some wiggle room, so when your lettuce supply is interrupted, they can say you didn't plan quite carefully enough. I figured since this year's growing season has been cool, I would try growing some lettuce in midsummer. So I planted eight varieties (by seed) on July 3rd. I'm really not expecting much---if one or two of these performs well I'll be happy. After my early spring lettuce flagged, I started to use more kale in my salad---the Dwarf Blue Curled and Dinosaur kale that I planted in mid-April is still thriving. The flavor is best when picked young. Though highly nutritious, kale is not yet widely accepted, but it is becoming a popular item at our Great Lakes Farmer's Market.



Kale 'Dinosaur'

Speaking of lettuce, a message from an alarmed customer was left on my voicemail. She was picking her lettuce (apparently for the first time) and said that it was bleeding white juice. What was the matter? she wondered.



Peppers planted July 2nd

I called back and reassured her that this was completely normal. All lettuce varieties bleed "white juice," some more than others. The botanical name for lettuce is *Lactuca sativa*. The ancients knew of this "milky" characteristic, and gave the plant an appropriate genus name, *lactuca*---obviously related to such "milky" words as lactate, lactose, lactoid, etc. The common English word "lettuce" is derived from *lactuca*.

Little has changed with the tomato plants at my place. I disposed of the bad ones. The remaining seventeen plants have put on normal growth. A number of them have fruit, but it looks like there won't be anything to pick for at least another week. I attribute the delay to the cool June that we just experienced. Now I see that for the next week or so we will have night temperatures above 60 degrees, so that should help with the ripening. I just gave my plants a second dose of granular fertilizer, in hopes of a larger fruit set with the second set of flowers.

I mentioned in an earlier blog that I sometimes enjoy watching weeds grow. Usually not a whole bunch of them, but if I see something interesting, I like to watch and see how it behaves. This statuesque Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) popped up alongside my brussels sprouts---it is now flowering at a height of about five feet. Also called Flannel Leaf, mullein thrives



in waste areas---roadsides and such. Although many think it is an American native, it hails from

Europe. In ancient times, the sturdy flower stalks were soaked with oil and used as torches. Quite spectacular, for a "weed."



Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)