Degrees of Engagement

Now seems a good time for an update on my involvement in the Gardener's Network program at Native Seed SEARCH. Back in April I wrote about the varieties I was testing for the program and now that I am into planting, growing and recording data, I have additional information.

For review, the four varieties that I am testing this year are Chapolte "Pinole Maiz", Minnie's Apache Hubbard Squash, Hopi Black Pinto Beans and San Juan Pueblo White Tepary Beans. To date I have planted the Pinole Maiz and Minnie's Apache Hubbard Squash in a two sisters bed – left out the climbing beans this year. And I have also planted the Tepary Beans. I am holding off planting the Hopi Black Pinto Beans until we get some evidence of a monsoon season, or at least a good rain.

More about the Gardeners Network program

The information gathered by the Garden's Network will help Native Seed SEARCH determine which varieties are "the best" which may be problematic and which may require specific growing conditions, etc. Ultimately, they hope to develop this information into a web-based resource for gardeners. For this growing season there are thirty-eight individual gardeners from eighteen states across the country growing and testing 84 different varieties.

So how do you measure a variety's suitability for home gardens in different growing regions? What data do you collect to measure suitability? Before getting involved with this program I had kept records of planting dates, companions and planting sequences and some notes on results, but nothing as thoughtful and organized as the information I am collecting for these test crops.

Some questions are the same for all varieties such as:

Catalog No/Crop name: **ZP 90 Chapalote "Pinole Maiz"**
Date of planting: **6/22/05**
Date transplanted into garden (if applicable):
Date of 1st germination: **6/26/05**
No. seeds planted: **48**
No. seeds germinated(date) **44 (7/8/05) (92% germination rate)**
Did the crop receive full sun, partial sun, or full shade? **Full sun**

Followed by observations specific to type of varieties, such as for corn:

Date of first tasseling: Date of first silking:
Length of time that tassels and silks were produced:
What colors were the tassels? silks?
Were stalks/leaves/veins other colors besides green? If so, estimate the number or percentage of plants and indicate which plant part was colored.
Were aerial roots produced?
If so, on how many nodes?
Did you have any problem with lodging (falling over of the stalks)?
How tall was the plant at maturity?
Date of harvest:
How many ears, on average, were produced per plant?
Did you hand pollinate? How?
How well-filled were the ears (were there kernels on the entire ear)?
Can the corn be eaten as a "sweet" corn when it's immature? How does it taste?

And then another set of general questions and observations:

Were there any problems with disease, fungus, insects, or other pests? How did plants respond? Did you use anything to treat the problem? How well did it work?

Please provide an overall description of how you grew this crop, including a brief description of how you watered (hose, drip, rain only, etc.) and about how often (i.e., did it experience some drought, weekly soakings), whether it needed trellising, was it intercropped and with what, did it need extra shade, did the grasshoppers seem to like it particularly, etc.

Planted in four clusters (12 seeds to a cluster) on a 4' x 16' bed, following a crop of snap peas/onions companion planted with Dutch White Clover. The bed was not tilled and no compost was added, although some of the mature clover was uprooted and left as mulch (killed-mulch). I also planted 16 seeds of Minnie's Apache Hubbard along one edge of the same bed – on the west side of the corn. The bed is oriented N/S.

Three of the plants that germinated died – one was an albino with no chlorophyll, one had partial chlorophyll and one just remained stunted and died. Germination by cluster 12/12, 10/12, 11/12, 11/12 – 41 plants surviving 7/08/05

Watered with buried drip soaker lines and with additional surface delivery emitters.

As you can clearly see, growing for this program requires a high degree of engagement. It means thinking about how and where to integrate the test plots into my overall garden planting plan, and it requires closer and more detailed observations and record keeping. The result is I am more engaged with the garden plants and with the subtle relationships in the garden. And I am also more engaged with my own enjoyment of gardening. Participating in a gardening program with others is guaranteed to increase the enjoyment and improve gardening practices for everyone!

E-version of this article with photographs of test crops is posted on my Master Gardener web page at *www.darrolshillingburg.com/GardenSite/MasterGardener.html*

Until next month,

Garden well - eat local

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