

# T•H•E D•I•R•T

Newsletter of Master Gardener Volunteers of CCE Schoharie and Otsego Counties  
Gardening • Environment • Community • Sustainability • Education



## Tomato Suckers: To Prune or Not To Prune?

If you've spent any time around tomato growers, you've probably heard someone passionately argue that you have to remove tomato suckers. Chances are, you've also heard someone just as passionate say you should leave them alone.

So who's right? The answer is... both.

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*Grow with us! Subscribe for gardening tips, pollinator-friendly ideas, and local wisdom for Otsego & Schoharie counties in Central New York.*

## The Secret to Next Year's Garden Starts Now

By August, most gardeners are focused on harvesting tomatoes, picking beans, and trying to keep up with zucchini. It might not seem like the time to think about your soil, but fall is one of the best opportunities to improve next year's garden.

People often use the words dirt and soil as if they mean the same thing. They don't. Dirt is simply ground. Soil is alive. It's home to earthworms, fungi, bacteria, insects, and

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*Danaus plexippus* (Monarch butterfly)  
From joyfulbutterfly.com

## Pollinator Watch

The graceful flight of a butterfly in the garden inspires poetry or at least a smile. Butterflies favor brightly colored clustered flowers that are open during the day and provide the nectar that they need. They probe for nectar with their long tongues, reaching deep into flowers.

The monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is the most well-known, with its orange wings, black veins and white markings, but there are many others. There are around 700 species of butterflies that are native to North America and some 18,500 species worldwide.

Butterflies are generally easy to distinguish from moths. Butterflies are active during the day, and the vast majority of moths feed at night. Butterflies generally rest with their wings in the closed position, and moths generally keep their wings open. Also, butterflies have thin, long antennae, and moths have shorter, feathery antennae.

Butterflies are not as good at pollinating as bees. They have long, thin legs, so their bodies don't come into contact with pollen as readily. They also are not

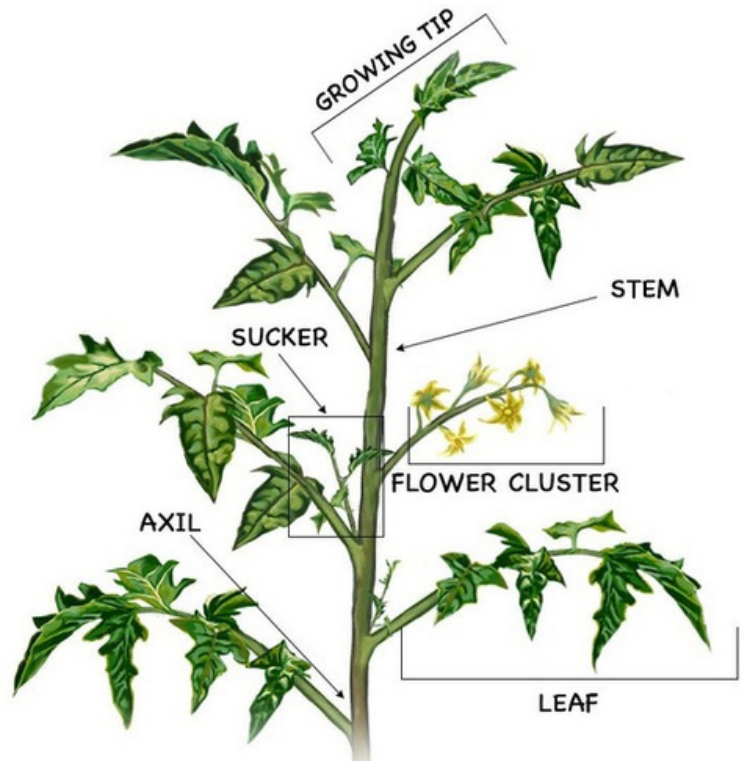
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## Tomato Suckers continued from page 1

Tomato pruning is one of those gardening topics where there isn't a single right way to do it. Whether or not you remove suckers depends on the type of tomato you're growing and what you're hoping to get out of your plants.

First, what exactly is a sucker?

A tomato sucker is a small shoot that grows in the "V" where a leaf branch meets the main stem. If left alone, that little shoot will eventually become another stem, producing its own leaves, flowers, and fruit.



For indeterminate tomatoes—the varieties that keep growing and producing until frost—many gardeners choose to remove at least some of these suckers. They don't necessarily remove every one, but thinning the plant can have several advantages.

Pruning helps improve air circulation, which can reduce

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the chances of fungal diseases and make it harder for insect pests to hide. It also keeps plants from becoming an unruly jungle by late summer, making them easier to stake, tie, and harvest. With fewer stems competing for energy, the remaining fruit often grows larger, and the first tomatoes may ripen a little earlier. Since pruned plants stay narrower, they can also be planted a bit closer together.

That doesn't mean pruning is always the better choice.

Every leaf on a tomato plant is helping produce energy through photosynthesis. Removing too many leaves means the plant has less surface area to capture sunlight. Fewer leaves also mean less shade for developing fruit, which can lead to sunscald during hot, sunny weather. And because you're removing stems that would have produced flowers, you'll usually end up with fewer tomatoes overall.

For determinate tomatoes, which grow to a

certain size before setting most of their fruit, heavy pruning is generally not recommended. In fact, removing too many suckers can reduce your harvest. If you do prune determinate varieties, Extension recommendations suggest removing only the suckers below the first flower cluster. This helps create a stronger main stem while preserving the rest of the plant's fruit-producing branches.

So what's the takeaway?

If your tomato patch tends to become an overgrown thicket every August, a little selective pruning can make a big difference. If your goal is simply to harvest as many tomatoes as possible, leaving most of the suckers in place is a perfectly reasonable approach.

Like many things in gardening, the best teacher is experience. Try pruning one plant while leaving another alone and compare the results. Your garden, your growing conditions, and your preferences may give you a different answer than someone else's—and that's part of the fun. ■



*Pollinator continued from page 2*

stashing pollen somewhere on their bodies like various species of bees do. They are only after the nectar. Despite their lower pollination efficiency per flower, butterflies compensate through the sheer number of flowers they visit and the distances they travel. They also play an important role in pollinating some plants that bees seldom visit, such as cotton.

Butterflies are a critical part of the insect food chain. Their caterpillars are a high-protein food source for the chicks of many bird species. For example, a single nest of chickadees requires six to nine thousand caterpillars to survive their first two weeks of life, per Douglas W. Tallamy, Entomology and Wildlife Ecology Professor at the University of Delaware.

Some butterfly caterpillars have evolved defensive appearances to try to avoid becoming baby bird food. For example, the caterpillars of the Red-spotted Purple butterfly resemble those of the pipevine swallowtail. This may help them escape predators, because the pipevine swallowtail caterpillar has an unpleasant taste. The green Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) caterpillar has large fake eyespots, giving it the appearance of a small snake. Other caterpillars such as the

Giant Swallowtail Caterpillar (*Papilio cresphontes*) have a mottled appearance resembling bird droppings.

Some species of butterflies have complicated relationships with specific plant species that have evolved alongside them for millions of years. Most of us are familiar with the monarch's need for milkweed plants in their larval stage. Black swallowtail caterpillars (*Papilio polyxenes*) seek the foliage of plants in the carrot family, such as dill, parsley, fennel, carrot, and Queen Anne's lace. The caterpillars of the Regal Fritillary (*Speyeria idalia*) and the Great Spangled Fritillary (*Speyeria cybele*) favor native violets.

The populations of most butterfly species are in decline, with many now classified as vulnerable or at risk. They face challenges from habitat loss and fragmentation, pesticide use, invasive species, and environmental changes. We can help mitigate some of these factors with our gardens. Planting nectar sources can provide butterflies with food. Provide a shallow water source, such as a water dish filled with pebbles.

Also, include the host plants that caterpillars can feed on. It can be fun to grow additional host plants each year, to see when the associated caterpillars will show up in your garden. For example, plant the perennial Dutchman's Pipe vine (*Aristolochia tomentosa*) and watch for the Pipevine Swallowtail butterfly and its larvae (*Battus philenor*). Plant paw-paw trees (*Asimina triloba*) and look for the Zebra Swallowtail (*Protographium marcellus*).

Want to know more? Here are a couple of organizations that support butterfly conservation: the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation ([Xerces.org](http://Xerces.org)) and the Butterfly Conservation Society ([butterfly-conservation.org](http://butterfly-conservation.org)). ■



*Papilio polyxenes* (Black Swallowtail butterfly) From [joyfulbutterfly.com](http://joyfulbutterfly.com)

## Seed Saving 101

Saving seeds is an easy way to grow your favorite varieties again next year while saving a little money. The key is to collect seeds only from open-pollinated or heirloom plants. Hybrid varieties won't grow true to type, so the plants you get next year may be very different from the ones you grew this season.

Choose healthy, disease-free plants and let the fruit fully mature before harvesting seeds. Tomatoes, peppers, beans, peas, and lettuce are all great crops for beginners. Once collected, clean and dry seeds thoroughly before storing them in a labeled paper envelope or glass jar in a cool, dark, dry place.

With proper storage, many vegetable seeds remain viable for several years, making seed saving a rewarding tradition that connects one growing season to the next.

## Preparing Garden Beds for Fall Planting

By the time August rolls around, many garden beds are beginning to empty as peas, garlic, onions, and other early crops are harvested. Rather than letting those spaces sit bare, take the opportunity to prepare them for fall planting.

Start by removing any spent or diseased plants. Healthy plant material can be added to the compost pile, but anything showing signs of



disease should be discarded to help prevent problems from carrying over into next season. Pull weeds before they have a chance to set seed, and gently loosen the soil if it has become compacted during the summer.

Once the bed is cleaned up, add a layer of compost or other well-aged organic matter. There's no need to work it deeply into the soil. Earthworms and soil microbes will gradually incorporate it over time. If you plan to grow fall vegetables such as spinach, lettuce, radishes, or kale, your bed will be ready to plant.

Preparing beds now also makes fall garlic planting much easier. When October arrives, you'll have loose, healthy soil that's ready for cloves instead of scrambling to prepare a bed before the ground freezes.

A garden doesn't stop growing when summer winds down. With a little attention now, your beds can continue producing this fall while building healthier soil for seasons to come. ■

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countless other organisms that work together to break down organic matter, recycle nutrients, and create an environment where plants can thrive.

The good news is that building healthy soil doesn't require expensive products. It starts with adding organic matter.

As your garden winds down this fall, spread a layer of finished compost over your beds. You don't have to till it in. Earthworms, microbes, and winter's freeze-thaw cycles will gradually work it into the soil for you. If you don't have compost, shredded leaves are another excellent option. Instead of bagging them up for the curb, let them become food for your garden.

Fall is also a great time to think about keeping your soil covered. Bare soil is more likely to erode, lose moisture, and allow weeds to take hold. A layer of mulch or a fall-planted cover crop can protect the soil all winter while adding organic matter for next season.



One thing many gardeners are trying to do less of is tilling. While it can be helpful when starting a new garden, repeated tilling breaks apart soil structure and disrupts the organisms that spend all year building it. Leaving the soil as undisturbed as possible allows those natural processes to continue working through the winter.

You won't transform poor soil overnight, and that's okay. Healthy soil is built one season at a time. Every load of compost, every layer of leaves, and every decision to protect your garden through the winter is an investment in next year's harvest.

Your tomatoes may be finishing up, but your soil is just getting started. ■



# Garden Chore Checklist

August is a month of harvesting, planning, and preparing the garden for a productive finish to the growing season.

## Vegetable Garden

- Harvest vegetables often to encourage continued production.
- Plant cool-season crops such as spinach, lettuce, radishes, arugula, kale, and turnips for a fall harvest.
- Remove finished crops like peas and garlic, then add compost before replanting or sowing a cover crop.
- Pinch tomato suckers if desired and continue supporting tall plants as they grow.
- Harvest onions once tops have fallen over and begin curing them in a dry, well-ventilated location.

## Soil & Garden Care

- Continue watering deeply during dry weather, especially newly planted fall crops.
- Add compost to empty beds to improve soil for next season.

- Consider planting cover crops in beds that won't be used again this year.
- Keep mulch in place to conserve moisture and reduce late-season weeds.

## Pest & Disease Watch

- Check tomatoes and potatoes for signs of late blight and remove infected plants promptly.
- Continue scouting for squash vine borers, squash bugs, and hornworms.
- Remove diseased leaves from tomatoes and cucurbits to improve airflow and slow disease spread.
- Clean up fallen fruit and plant debris to discourage insects and reduce disease pressure.

Find more gardening guidance at [Cornell Garden Based Learning](https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/)

<https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/>. ■



## Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer

**QUESTION:** My squash and cucumbers have a white, powdery coating - anything I can do?

**ANSWER:** It's likely powdery mildew, a common late-season disease on cucurbits. Remove badly infected leaves, avoid overhead watering if possible, and improve airflow around plants. Remove infected plant debris at the end of the season to help reduce problems next year.

To ask a Master Gardener a question, visit: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program/ask-a-master-gardener-volunteer>

# The Victory Garden: A Tradition That Still Grows

Victory Gardens first became popular during World War I and really took off during World War II. Families were encouraged to grow vegetables at home so more commercially grown food could be sent to troops overseas. By 1944, an estimated 20 million Victory Gardens were producing nearly 40% of the fresh vegetables eaten in the United States.

Today, nobody is planting a garden because of wartime rationing, but a lot of us are rediscovering the same reasons people gardened back then. Fresh tomatoes taste better than the ones at the grocery store. Kids are more likely to try vegetables they helped grow. And there's



something satisfying about walking outside to pick dinner.

The vegetables grown in Victory Gardens weren't anything unusual. Tomatoes, beans, carrots, onions, lettuce, peppers, squash, cabbage, and beets were common because they were dependable and produced well in a home garden. Many of those same crops are still favorites for beginning gardeners today.

You don't need a huge garden to enjoy the benefits, either. A couple of raised beds, a handful of containers, or even a sunny corner of the yard can produce more than you might expect. Gardening has a way of slowing us down, getting us outside, and reminding us that good food doesn't always come from a store.

If your garden is starting to fill your kitchen counters this summer, you're in good company. Gardeners have been finding creative ways to use their harvests for generations. To help, we've included a classic Victory Garden Soup recipe in this issue. It's an easy way to put those homegrown vegetables to good use—and maybe carry on a tradition that's been around for more than a century. ■

A vintage-style recipe card for "VICTORY GARDEN SOUP". The card is framed by a decorative border of various vegetables including carrots, potatoes, leafy greens, and a pineapple. The text on the card is as follows:

**VICTORY GARDEN SOUP**

| PREPARATION | PORTIONS | COOKING TIME |
|-------------|----------|--------------|
| 15 minutes  | 4 people | 25 minutes   |

**INGREDIENTS**

|                               |                                    |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 2 tbsp olive oil              | 1 garlic clove, peeled and minced  | 2 tbsp chopped cilantro or parsley |
| 1 onion, peeled and chopped   | 1 c. fresh or frozen peas          | Salt and pepper to taste           |
| 3 carrots, peeled and chopped | 11 c. fresh or frozen corn kernels |                                    |
| 1 potato, peeled and chopped  | 2 qts chicken broth                |                                    |
|                               | tablespoons apple cider vinegar    |                                    |

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Warm the olive oil in a large stockpot over medium heat.
2. Add the onion and cook for 2 minutes.
3. Add the carrots and potato and cook for 4 minutes.
4. Add the garlic, peas, and corn and cook for 2 minutes.
5. Add the broth and vinegar and cook on low heat for about 20 minutes.
6. Season with salt and pepper and cilantro.
7. Divide into bowls.

## Community Events

**August 12, 2026**

Harvesting and Preserving Herbs for  
Cooking with Gert Coleman  
123 Lake St, Cooperstown, NY

**August 29, 2026**

Garden Open House and Family Farm  
Day  
123 Lake St, Cooperstown, NY

See the full list of upcoming community  
events: [https://cceschoharie-  
otsego.org/events](https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/events)



## Weather Watch

August's mix of warm weather and scattered rain will keep gardens growing. Harvest often, watch for disease, and start planning for fall. Visit the NRCC :

<https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/index.html>

| Dates     | Weather Conditions                                                |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aug 1-6   | Scattered t-storms, warm                                          |
| Aug 7-10  | Heavy rain north, isolated showers south; cool                    |
| Aug 11-18 | Sunny, then t-storms; mild north, cool south                      |
| Aug 19-31 | Isolated t-storms, mild                                           |
| August    | Temp 67.5° (+2 avg N, -1 avg S)<br>Precip 4" (+2 avg N, -2 avg S) |



## Grow With Us on Social Media!



**Master Gardeners Volunteer- Otsego**  
<https://www.facebook.com/CCEOtsegoMG>



**Master Gardeners Volunteer- Schoharie**  
<https://www.facebook.com/CCESchoharieMG>

## Our Mission

We prepare volunteers to be peer educators who build relationships with community audiences to integrate local experience and research-based knowledge in planning for and initiating steps to manage gardens, lawns, and landscapes with an emphasis on food security and environmental stewardship.

*Learn more about the CCE Master Gardener Volunteer programs of Otsego & Schoharie counties here: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program>*

Master Gardeners Volunteers are trained through Cornell Cooperative Extension who share research-based gardening knowledge with the community. We answer questions through the Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer service, teach classes, and maintain demonstration gardens in Cooperstown and Cobleskill. You'll find us at farmers markets, fairs, and local events offering practical tips, and we also grow plants for fundraisers, lead beginner gardener programs, and offer soil testing to help neighbors grow with confidence.

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