

Revival in Gardening by the Moon

by Sheree Scott



The ancient practice of gardening by the phases of the moon started centuries ago, in the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, back to the time of Pliny, Plutarch and the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. Information was gathered on the growth habits of plants and animals which was vital for the people whose very survival depended on a good harvest.

It fell out of favour in the wake of the Industrial Revolution with the advancing modernisation and development of artificial fertilisers. But thanks to the foresight of Rev. Timothy Harley, this folklore was gathered from around the globe into a volume called *Moon Lore*, published in London in 1885, ready for a revival of moon gardening again today.

The practice divides plants into two groups – above ground crops and root crops - those plants that produce their edible part above the ground show best growth in the period before the full moon. After the full moon but before the next new moon the focus is on planting root crops, pruning, cultivating and removing weeds before they have time to flourish in the next growth phase.

Briefly it works on the principle that at different moon phases the gravitational pull of the sun and moon are combined to create a high sap run in plants. At other times these natural forces create a “rest period” for plants.

According to *R J Harris's Moon Gardening* from new moon to full moon, the moisture in the Earth's crust moves upwards under the pressure that is exerted by the rising water table. As a consequence, there is more moisture available within the top soil for seeds and new plants. The upward pressure also encourages better moisture absorption by the seeds and plants. This increases the rate of germination and plant survival.

From full moon to the next new moon, the pressure upon root systems exerted by the prevailing moisture reduces as the water table falls. This encourages downward growth, making it an ideal time to plant crops for which you want to harvest the roots, such as carrots, beetroot, parsnips and onions. It is also the ideal time to prune, for example, because the reduced pressure causes reduced bleeding of cut branches.

Operating a commercial market garden, the creators of the perpetual Moon Gardening Calendar, Ray and Jean Scott (www.moongardeningcalendar.com), had plenty of chances to test the theory in the 1970s. They started by putting a

series of bean seeds on a tray of damp paper or cotton wool on the windowsill at different times of the month. After its initial germination, they found a lima bean could grow 10cm overnight during the peak growing time, while others planted during the contrary period failed to do anything.

Over more than 35 years growing vegetables and operating a small plant nursery, I've seen seeds planted in the correct moon phase grow faster and healthier than others from the same batch planted at the opposite phase.

Lettuce is an especially good example as they have high water needs. It's commonly accepted that lettuce bolt to seed with stress and high temperatures.

Planting in the period of the waxing moon, the lettuce germinate quickly and are less stressed due to the higher natural soil moisture content during that time.

Lettuce planted with the waning moon are slower to germinate, creating greater stress on the plant so they are more likely to go to seed.

On the other side of the coin, we've had beetroot go to seed because it was planted on the waxing moon instead of after the full moon, which is better suited to root crops.

All this practical knowledge has been condensed into a perpetual Moon Calendar that takes the mystery out of the moon cycles. It is available from our website at www.moongardeningcalendar.com

The A4 calendar has a moving dial that divides the 28-day lunar cycle into six periods of various lengths for different activities such as planting above-ground crops, another time for root crops, when to fertilise, cultivate and propagate.

The new moon on the dial is lined up with the matching date of the new moon for each month and the relevant gardening advice read off for each day. In this way it can be used month after month for years ahead.

While operating the plant nursery the calendar was invaluable for improving the strike rate of cuttings. You could just see the difference in the sap flow of plants. With more sap in the cutting, there's a better chance of it growing.

The calendar also sets an invaluable monthly routine for different jobs and puts you more in tune with what is happening in nature.

By having the calendar as a frame of reference for the month, we've noticed it usually rains at the start of a growing period, softening the ground and reducing the stress on new plants.

So moon gardening isn't some weird ritual where everyone strips off and dances around the garden by the light of the full moon – although it may help to keep the bandicoots from digging up the lettuce.

In reality the date of the full moon is a poor time to plant or sow seed. The added moonlight helps seeds to germinate quickly but the growth becomes weak and spindly and the plants often succumb to insect attack and diseases in the more stressful fortnight ahead.

This is nature's way of keeping a balance. After all that full moon excitement, it's time to just chill out – for plants anyway.

You can observe this easily in the rate of new growth on shrubs or lawn. By cutting your lawn after a full moon you will be rewarded with slower growth for a week or two before the next growing time.

The Moon Calendar is available from www.moongardeningcalendar.com or write to R&J Scott, PO Box 492, Kuranda Qld 4881, Australia.