

Orange Carrots Got Mixed Among Red Strawberries

I walked up to the garden we had on the hill behind the house at Tomahawk Ranch and pulled weeds from the strawberry bed. The beds we planted are raised, without containment, so they slope from nearly two feet high to as low as the path between beds in about two feet. I don't know how carrots got planted among the strawberry plants. Perhaps one of us who watered let the spray get too heavy or stay too long in one place, and carrot seeds washed down the slope from where we planted them into the strawberry bed.

Note for next year: Be sure some carrot seeds get planted between strawberry plants. Pulling carrots along with weeds and eating them as I work makes the project more interesting and tastier. These are small, very tender carrots. I wash two dozen at the garden hose and take them down the hill and into the house. "Eat a lot of carrots," I say. I hear no arguments. In 10 minutes, they are gone. "I'll bring some more, next time I come down."

Anne comes to this Girl Scout ranch we take care of. She and Laura, my wife, are going to organize tents and other camping equipment. On their way up to the ranch, they stop at the garden to visit. Anne is also a gardener, so we talk about gardens as I loosen soil and pull weeds and carrots. I say, "If I figured all the time I put in and allowed a reasonable wage, the produce we're getting probably costs 10 times what it would cost to buy at the store." But carrots like these can't be bought anywhere, at any price. Even friends who also work a lot of organic material into their soil don't grow carrots that are quite this tender and sweet. I'm not bragging, of course, just telling about something I've noticed.

As far back as when we were in northern California, my reputation with carrots was getting started. Our neighbor called me Captain Carrot, and the name has come back to me a few times since then.

When we lived in Sumpter, Oregon, and would get together with friends and make ice cream, I often suggested carrot ice cream. Not everyone liked the ice cream we made by adding finely grated carrots before we cranked it. I did. Some others did, too. When we added carrot juice instead of grated carrots, the ice cream was a total success. Even those who had wrinkled their noses at the idea of carrot ice cream came back to see if

there might be just a little left in the bottom of the container or said they would do all the cranking if we would mix up another batch.

I mention to Anne and Laura that birds have been eating the few strawberries we've been getting on these first-year plants. Anne makes several suggestions, including owls, wooden owls, plastic owls, and owls that are filled with air.

I don't know why I didn't think of that. I knew people who put models of owls around their house to scare swallows so they wouldn't build nests under the eaves. "That's a great idea. It'll probably work. Wait. I'll get you some carrots." I turn on the hose and wash those I've accumulated as we talked and hand them out. Anne and Laura leave for the upper part of the ranch, munching carrots as they go, a dozen or so in each hand.

I don't plant rows of carrots; I plant beds of various lengths, just narrow enough that the middle can be reached from either side, for weeding and thinning. We have carrot beds 4 feet wide and 10 feet long, with no more space between the carrots than they need to grow to full size. This is not more carrots than we use. I eat many carrots every day, and my family follows my lead.

I need a place to move the well-rooted strawberry plants that have started from runners. I have one small planting of peas that have stopped blossoming. They have no small pods. I know what to do with the nearly mature pods filled with full-sized peas.

Edible-pod peas are a marvelous invention. I pick all the pods and add them to three dozen carrots I've pulled from among the strawberries since Laura and Anne left. Then I pull the pea plants and add them to the pile of weeds and carrot tops. I shovel dirt over them and plant pea seeds in the resulting pile. There might be time for another crop of peas before cold weather shuts the garden down. The decomposing green plants will provide nutrients for the growing plants.

My soil is not homogenous. I can't rake out some of my raised beds, because the spoiled hay I buried there is not decomposed. The rake will pull it out in large clumps. The hay takes a lot of nitrogen to decompose. So I added chicken manure, covered it with dirt, and watered heavily several times before I planted peas, cabbage, kohlrabi, kale, spinach, and lettuce.

It's an adventure and an experiment. If I put in too much nitrogen, it will kill the plants. Too little, and they will be stunted. I did it right. The plants are healthy and growing well.

I used to have a soil-testing kit. I never used it, so I gave it to a friend

who did use it. I watch how the plants grow and study their colors to see if anything is missing from the soil. I've built many gardens, and my experience serves me well. Building good soil without testing it is like cooking without a recipe. For some, it works. Smells, colors, consistencies, and tastes guide the cook and the gardener.

I've stopped all work. I sit, mind slowing down, thinking about a lot of gardens I've built. I think about the spoiled hay, horse, rabbit, chicken, goat, and llama manure, and the dolomitic limestone I added to the decomposed granite soil that was here when I started. I think about the best gardeners there are, earthworms working persistently within the soil. I think myself into my favorite state of mind, where there are few verbal thoughts, just a wide sense of contact with the soil, the plants, the garden, the world around the garden.

I don't know how much time passes. A crow lands in the fir tree outside the garden fence and caws. It's urging me to leave the garden so it can come and see how deeply I've buried the last bucket of kitchen compost. I have no objection to its presence in the garden. Smaller birds have already eaten the strawberries. This is cold country, and I don't grow corn. Crows stir up the compost and the dirt where it's buried. They're the closest thing I have to the type of machine that mixes the soil. "Crowtotillers" they are, when they're in the garden.

I've weeded half the strawberries. I'll save the other half for tomorrow afternoon. I water everything and wash three dozen carrots. I pick a few onions and some kale to add to the carrots and the peas, and put the entire harvest into my shirttail, holding it up for a carrying sling. I leave the garden and close the gate behind me. If everyone is in a carrot-eating mood, someone might have to come up and harvest more before dinner. There are plenty.