

# Don't Dig Up the Carrots!

By William Mason

Imagine biting into a cold, sweet watermelon on a hot, dry summer day; there's a slight afternoon breeze, but it's warm and offers no relief from the heat. Feel the juice as it trickles down your chin while you anticipate the next cold bite of the melon's bright, intensely-red flesh. Recall the sense of excitement you experienced when you picked this monstrous 45-pound fruit — fresh off the vine — only an hour or so before ...



Over the years I've become a rather successful gardener, so such scenes are a regular part of my Southern California summer: Last year's crop included dozens of sweet, crisp watermelons, each one weighing 35 to 47 pounds, full-flavored green and red bell peppers, sunflowers, yellow crook-neck squash, and a tomato plant for my wife, Caryn; I'm not thrilled about tomatoes, but she likes them. This year I've dropped the squash and added herbs, yellow bell pepper, a second variety of green bell pepper, one hot pepper, a second watermelon variety called Moon and Stars, and cantaloupe. Sometime during the late spring a small pumpkin patch will be added for Marley, our first grandchild, and she just might be active enough by fall to crawl around among the vines to choose her own pumpkin.

One of my most valuable harvests, however, had nothing to do with the incredible dance of flavors my tongue has experienced as a result of my efforts; indeed, this harvest had value precisely because the only tastes associated with it were the tastes of dust from the soil and salt that come from the sweat of honest, hard labor.

Early each spring I cover the earth with three to five inches of fresh straw in order to control weeds and help retain moisture for the benefit of the soon-to-be-planted crops — a ritual I completed in March of this year. Once the straw is distributed, I let it lie undisturbed for a short period of time while I plan my garden.

This year I expanded the garden's area, something I had contemplated doing for several years. And it is from within this extension I gathered my revelatory harvest — my epiphany born of dust and sweat.

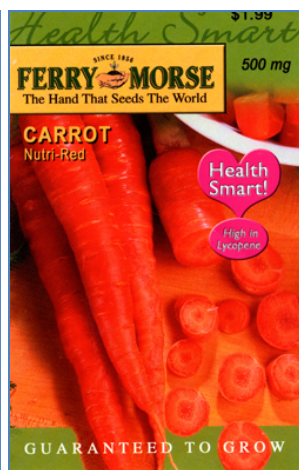
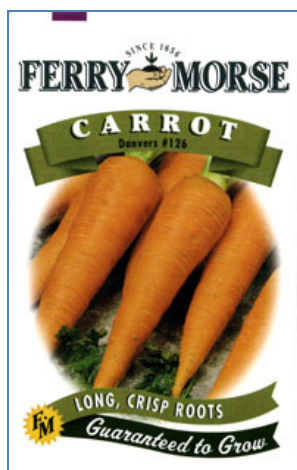
Reclaiming this patch of ground was not easy: It was full of weeds and the earth itself was dry and full of compact clods that could be broken apart only by hand or

with brute force aided by the back of a shovel. The only way to successfully reclaim the area was to plunge my shovel as deeply as possible into the earth, turn it over completely, break up the exposed clods, weed as I moved along, repeat the process until the weeds and ground finally gave way, and then amend the soil with an organic material that would allow the earth to breathe, retain water, and accept the tender roots of new growth.

This I did.

However, even though I amended the soil only where I was going to plant, I had to turn and weed an area three to four times larger in order to ensure my garden extension would not be overtaken by weeds. Because of our backyard's layout, using straw was not an option for the extension — this means a constant one-on-one battle with weeds, so I needed an edge, including a defensive perimeter to help protect the ground where the actual crops were to be planted.

Having established my perimeter and prepared the new bed, I was now ready to introduce the plants: four varieties of bell pepper, one hot pepper, and one tomato. Normally I work with seed, but I wanted to reduce the time to harvest, so I used actual plants. Each was carefully placed in its own small hill within its own round, shallow basin, after which it was surrounded with a wire tomato cage and watered. The plants themselves were arranged like checkers on a checkerboard, so there was space to plant a small crop between them.



When I purchased the plants I also purchased — somewhat impulsively — two varieties of carrot seed: Danvers 126 and a rather intriguing Nutri-Red carrot which was entirely new to me. Nutri-Red carrots are, according to the information on the package, exceptionally high in heart-healthy lycopene, have great flavor, and are distinguished by their purplish-red hue. I had to try it. As for the purchase itself, I had considered growing carrots in the

past, although I had not planned to buy carrot seeds when I left the house.

About ten days after I planted the peppers and tomato I made room among them for both carrot varieties. Because the bed had been carefully prepared for the tomato and peppers, the seeds were easily sown.

But there's easy and then there's easy.

It had been a long day at work ... as usual, too much to do and not enough time. I did not want to return home and do gardening. Nonetheless, the peppers, tomato, and watermelon needed attention — and even though I was tired, I was determined to tend them ... and to sow those carrot seeds. Enough time had passed: The carrots needed planting.

To save time, I did not use a typical row configuration — a narrow bed along which there is a shallow, even narrower trench used to distribute water. I chose instead to simply level a small area, make two long, shallow indentations in the ground, insert the seeds, then cover them.

"After all," I thought, "these are carrots. How difficult can they be?"

Water would be supplied by hand, using a large watering can.



With the sowing completed, I retrieved my trusty watering can and gave the seeds a good watering. Unfortunately, the ground was not level, so the water pooled at one end. Too tired to be bothered, I ignored the problem, thinking I would simply water more carefully next time. Nevertheless, in the back of my mind I briefly wondered if the seeds would even sprout and

anxiously hoped they would; too much water will ruin a planting — and one end of that "leveled" patch of ground was thoroughly flooded.

Concerned about the water situation, I checked the carrots the next day. One end of the area seemed dry, but the other was still wet. I carefully applied more water to the dry end — and much of the water flowed to the wet end.

"This is a disaster," I thought. "Should have used a traditional row. Because of all that water, I'm not sure they're gonna grow."

Over the next week I watched those carrots like a kid watches an ice cream maker churn, knowing his favorite ice cream is being born. How I wanted those carrots to break the surface! It would be eight to twelve days before they sprouted ... I knew that ... but watched anyway. Meanwhile, I watered as best I could, applying the water

to the dry side as it flowed to the wet one, all the time wondering whether or not I was getting it right.

Eight days had passed since planting the carrots; once again I was surveying my handiwork and wondering whether or not the carrots would grow. Because of my previous experience with other crops, I expected to see a few carrots breaking the surface — but saw nothing.

"What's wrong?" I wondered. "Everything I've ever planted starts coming up on the seventh or eighth day. What's with these carrots? Bad seed? Too wet? Planted too deep?"

Water was given. But I started to genuinely doubt — ever so slightly — that they would sprout.

This entire scene was replayed the next day, only my doubts began to grow.

"Maybe I should replant," I said to myself. "No ... on second thought ... don't dig 'em up. Just wait to see what happens."

Saturday finally came around — day ten or eleven. And still no carrot sprouts. This was another major work day in the garden, so I had plenty to do. But those carrots would not leave me alone. How dare they not sprout! Pure stubbornness! From carrots! I had never seen anything take so long to break the surface.

"Look, get it over with. They're not gonna sprout," I silently reasoned. "Besides, you bought that parsley plant this morning and it needs a place to grow. Put it where the carrots are — the seeds that are *not* sprouting."

And then this small impression came: "Don't dig up the carrots. They *are* there."

"Okay," I responded. "I'll leave 'em alone. But they're not gonna grow."

I went about my other work: expanding a crude irrigation system, tending what had been planted, and sowing another crop ... cantaloupe.

But nearly every time I passed the carrots I thought to myself, "Get it over with. Dig 'em up. Plant the parsley."

Then the impression would come: "Don't dig up the carrots."

After a number of battles with this rather insistent impression, I finally took the parsley in hand and went to the carrot patch: This impression was not going to dictate

*my* behavior — the carrots were going to be evicted in favor of the parsley ... not as useful a crop, but at least it would grow. After all, I had an actual parsley plant — not just seed.

Again, the impression: "Don't dig up the carrots."

I ignored the thought and drove my shovel deep into the ground and turned the rich, brown earth. I repeated the motion. It was hot, dusty work, and I could taste the sweat on my upper lip, mingled with the dust raised as a result of the digging.

"Ah ... this is great," I thought. "I'm gonna have some really great parsley."

I turned the earth once more, but this time I looked more closely at what was being unearthed.

And there they were — dozens of carrot sprouts. The long, white, threadlike roots were well developed, and it was only a matter of time, perhaps another day or two, before they would have broken



the surface. Instead of carrots, I now had a graveyard full of what had been developing, healthy sprouts.



Parsley is good, and mine is growing well. In fact, a few sprigs were harvested just the other day.

But I would have preferred carrots.