

# If You Only Grow One Type of Spinach Let This One Be It



The weather has been up and down lately. One moment it's freezing cold, the next there's a mini-heatwave. It makes me glad that I didn't bother to plant too much in pursuit of a fall and winter harvest. A few carrot and beet tops are peeking out of the ground, the zinnias are still in full bloom (everyone asks about them – they're genuinely the best annual flower!), there's still chard growing in one patch, and the perpetual spinach I planted in the spring looks AMAZING.

## What's Perpetual Spinach?

Although it looks and tastes like spinach, it's actually a relative of beets and chard. While I enjoy beet tops occasionally and love the vibrancy of multi-colored chard, spinach has a distinct flavor that I love to include in a

variety of dishes.

Unfortunately, spinach is a pain in the neck to grow in the spring unless you plant early enough. Planting early means having some way of heating the soil (e.g., hoop tunnels). Since I don't, I need to plant spinach as soon as the ground warms, which can sometimes be as late as May. In recent years, the soil warms up later and later, and the summer rides in without notice. The sudden heat this year left me with spinach that bolted in seedling form. I didn't even get to harvest a single leaf.

Planting in the fall is possible, but sudden heat waves can also ruin the party for spinach-lovers. Is there a way for frugal gardeners to enjoy spinach without having to invest in crop protection accessories or make the extra effort to protect seedlings from the heat? There is indeed! If you've ever had trouble growing spinach, consider its perpetual cousin.

## **My Experience With Perpetual Spinach**

I planted perpetual spinach in the late spring expecting it to bolt as quickly as the rest of my spinach and watched as the leaves unfurled and grew without shooting out seed stalks. Curious, I left the leafy greens alone, and mostly forgot that they were even there since they were partially hidden by the bean bushes nearby.

At the height of the summer, the leaves yellowed slightly, and the plants wilted, though they didn't die off completely. I considered pulling the crop, but thankfully my hesitation caused me to leave the plants be. I'm glad I stepped away. In the last few weeks, the chillier weather seems to have given the spinach a whole new lease on life. The plants are bigger than ever before and are a beautiful bright green. Better yet, no pests seem to have taken an interest. I expect the cut-and-come-again crop will last well into the fall and maybe a few

weeks into winter.

I highly recommend planting this pseudo-spinach in your garden. It's definitely making the regular rotation in mine!

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## **Please, I Beg You. Bring in Your Tender Potted Plants!**



Every year around this time as I walk around the neighborhood with my dogs or pass by homes on my morning runs, I see the insane amount of people who throw away potted plants. In the summer, when the weather is hot and toasty, people calmer to buy all the beautiful plants at the nursery. In the spring, baskets of flowers are popular. In the middle of the summer, people buy tropical palms and glorious ferns to hang around

their backyard patios. Now, during the fall, its chrysanthemums are all the rage. Pumpkins start to appear on front porches, too.

I love seeing all this plant life around town. And I'm just as susceptible to plant sales and attractive displays of greenery. This summer, I brought a gorgeous banana plant home and found it a home on my back deck among a pretty display of string lights. With a single plant, I created a tropical atmosphere and made the space the perfect place to relax, unwind, and entertain.

Almost as soon as September rolled around, though, the nighttime temperatures dipped considerably. Afraid that my plants (I also bought two pink-stemmed plants to adorn my patio table) would succumb to the cold, I promptly brought them inside.

I urge all plant lovers and frugal gardeners to do the same! Those beautiful heat-loving tropicals can't hack frosty temps, and while some are more tender than others, it's better to be safe than sorry. Bring in your potted plants and enjoy their blooms and foliage for an extended period of time.

I placed my banana tree in my living room, and it's my new favorite place to hang out. I feel like I'm in a cozy indoor oasis. Don't leave your plants out to die! Don't let them wither away! What a waste of money! Take care of your precious plants by sheltering them from the cold, and you'll be rewarded with a continued display of beauty. If you manage to adequately care for your plants during the winter, you'll be able to set them out again once the weather warms. You'll escape the need to spend money next spring.

Many potted plants don't need as much attention in the winter anyhow, so bringing them in won't leave you with extra work on your hands. Watering needs typically diminish during the cold months. Tropical plants, however, may require higher levels of

humidity than are possible in your winter home. Place a humidifier nearby or spritz your plants with a spray bottle every so often. The spring is the best time to re-home your plant into a slightly larger vessel.

Don't have any tropical plants or potted flowers to bring inside? If you have a potted vegetable plant, it may be a good idea to bring that in, as well. Shelter potted peppers indoors and you'll have an extended harvest. Give them plenty of warmth and sunlight, and you'll be able to pick peppers throughout the off-season.

Do you bring your potted plants indoors? Have you been able to keep a plant alive for more than a season this way? Share your story in the comments!

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## **5 Things You Can Probably Still Plant Now for a Fall Harvest**



The warmth has returned for but a moment this week, though it definitely gets chilly throughout the night. As I slowly pull out spent crops from the garden, I'm still taking the time to pay attention to new seedlings poking through the earth. That's right. Things are still growing in the garden! Even as fall approaches, there are crops thriving in the cool air. Plants that wilted and struggled in the heat of the summer are now happy as can be. Cabbage heads grow bigger and small greens are growing bigger each day. I planted seeds at the end of August in hopes for a small final harvest of the vegetables that I don't often get to plant at the start of the season. Here, our spring is vicious and cold and by the time it heats up, it's too late for things like spinach because the afternoon sun is unforgiving.

At this time of year, my focus narrows. Most of the garden is slowly put to bed and I bring my still-growing crops closer to the home. I move containers to my deck and focus my new plantings in my large raised bed right outside my kitchen. I have bok choy, spinach, kale, and arugula growing happily

there. For some of you, there may still be ample time to sow a few seeds here and there. The key is choosing the right crops. A final sowing might seem like a bit of effort, but you'll be thankful for the extra harvest for your dinner plate. Another chance to save on your grocery bill!

### **Important criteria for late plantings**

**Maturity date:** Always always check the time to maturity for anything you plan to sow this late in the season. It's pointless to plant seeds for rutabaga or cabbage, for instance. The weather may be ideal right now, but they won't be able to grow quickly enough before your first frost date.

**Weather forecast:** Is a frost expected anytime soon? An early frost might be a problem for certain tender greens. Choose hardier varieties that can survive frost exposure if there's any worry that a frost might arrive early.

**First frost date:** When is your first expected frost date? Once it gets cold enough, even the toughest of plants stop growing. You'll need enough time between sowing and a frost to allow your plants to grow big enough for eating.

### **Manage Expectations**

Mother Nature is unpredictable. Even if you're early enough, an early frost might damage certain plantings and slow growth rates. Or, a sudden heat wave may stress your cool-season vegetables. Be ready for the unexpected and try not to take a loss too personally.

### **Best picks for late planting**

Here are my top five suggestions for late planting. They're an excellent option because they prefer cool weather, they're quick to mature, they're mostly problem-free, and they're fairly cold hardy.

**Arugula:** Most varieties grow very quickly and thrive in cool weather.

**Mesclun:** Choose a winter blend if you're planting late. Mesclun is a awesome choice for late planting because it's often best when picked and eaten at the baby leaf stage.

**Bok Choy:** You'll have fewer pest problems at the tail end of the season with this brassica crop and no issues with early bolting. Bok choy is also delicious when picked early.

**Spinach:** If you're in zone 5 like me, you probably have plenty of trouble sowing spinach early enough in the spring to get a sizeable harvest. In the heat, spinach germinates practically already bolted. It grows quickly and leaves can be eaten at any size.

**Radishes:** Another quick-growing crop that tastes better when grown in cooler weather. The warmth often leads to pungent radishes. Even if you pick your radishes and discover an absence of bulbs, the tops can also be eaten.

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## **Fall is Slowly Approaching: What to Do in the Garden**





As soon as the calendar flipped to September and 'back to school' was declared, Mother Nature seemed to follow suit. Nighttime temperatures chilled rapidly, and in the mornings, I need to throw on a sweater to head outside. I've wholeheartedly embraced the fall season. My pumpkin decorations are out, my candles are flickering on the credenza, and I'm dreaming about all the fun fall activities I want to partake in the coming months. Everything suddenly feels cozier. I'm eager to curl up and read through my TBR (to-be-read) pile of books. I'm irrationally upset over the fact that my wardrobe doesn't contain more orange hues. My weekly meal plan consists of stews, soups, and root vegetables. Fall is early, and I hope it's here to stay.

As a gardener, the arrival of fall typically means it's time to begin the yearly ritual cleanup. I try to get through it bit by bit, attacking some tasks earlier than others, so as not to overwhelm myself in late October or November. If you're noticing the chill sneaking up on you, but you're unsure where to start with your cleanup, here are a few suggestions:

**Get rid of nightshades:** Heat-loving plants are the first to be extracted from my garden. The cold nights begin to stress the eggplants and peppers. A few tomatoes might still appear, but if your plants are no longer producing, browning, and looking less than perky it's time to pull them and toss them in the brown bin. Never throw diseased plants in your compost, but feel free to toss healthy ones in there.

**Save some bean seeds:** I've left my first bean plants to die out because I'm planning to save some seeds from a few forgotten pods. Saving bean seeds is incredibly easy, and if you do it, you won't have to spend money on packets for next season. Leave the pods and harvest the seeds once the pods have dried out completely.

**Get rid of anything disease or pest-infested:** Toss skeletonize kale and brassicas into your city compost bin.

**Cover beds:** If you're growing anything for a late harvest, you may want to consider adding protection if you're in a particularly cold climate. A bit of cover is also useful to prevent leaves from falling all over your beds. It'll also keep pesky squirrels from snatching a last-minute snack.

**Remove non-permanent structures:** Decorations, non-permanent trellises, and unused pots and containers can be put away in the shed or garage for the season. Any summer tools (e.g., shade cloth) can be stored away safely, too.

**Don't forget your fall crops.** If you're growing things like arugula, lettuce, and spinach for a fall or winter harvest, don't forget about them. Even in the chillier weather, your plants need to be watered and cared for.

Do these things bit by bit and you'll discover that the end of the gardening season will become a lot less stressful. It's the exact same way I treat my house cleaning chores. I do a little bit of something every day. That way, I'm not left

pulling my hair to get it all in in a single day.

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## Easy Preserving for the Frugal Gardener: Tomato Edition



I'll say it loud and clear, I love the idea of canning, but I hate going through the process. It's long and tedious. I'm always left feeling paranoid that I've done something wildly wrong, which will leave me with botulism infested jars.

It's one of the reasons I'm partial to quick-pickling and other easy preservation methods. Recently, I was struggling to think of ways to use tomatoes in my cooking. I was adamant

that I didn't want to make sauce or do anything boring. I wanted a unique way to use the mountain of tomatoes that had accumulated on my counter. Alas, my efforts to think of anything creative didn't really materialize. Honestly, despite the vast amount of tomatoes on my hands these days, I'm uninterested in eating them except for occasionally in a sandwich.

It's one of the reasons I'm of the belief that tomatoes are overrated. Don't get me wrong, tomatoes are excellent food! But, they're very one-note. As someone who enjoys cooking a lot of Asian meals, tomatoes are tough to use up. They don't exactly fit into a stir fry dish!

So this weekend I stared at the beautiful mix of yellow, red, and purple tomatoes in my kitchen and decided to stop worrying about being creative. I cooked them down with the addition of a few spices and used my trusty handheld blender (AKA: immersion blender) to create a thick super-tomato-ey sauce. The glorious pile of tomatoes made enough for two 750 mL jars of sauce. I expect more tomatoes to arrive in the near future, so the two jars suited me just fine.

After letting the sauce cool a bit – a very small bit because I'm impatient – I poured it into the jars and left them to cool a little longer because everything was still piping hot. Later, I popped them into my basement freezer.

Super easy, right? Instead of letting my tomatoes go to waste, I made a sauce that I'll be able to pull out of the freezer anytime I need it. For pasta, pizza, and whatever else. The jars are relatively large, so I envision one will last us through a few delicious meals. I'm sure I'll be thankful for my minimal effort when winter comes at us full throttle.

Another bonus? I won't have to spend money on jars of tomato sauce, which are surprisingly expensive at the supermarket!

*Do you have other simple sauces or recipes that you like to*

*make in order to preserve your harvest? Sound off in the comments!*

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## **Cooking on the Cheap: Snacking from Your Garden**



Believe it or not, for me, one of the toughest parts about gardening is figuring out how to utilize the harvest. Often, I find myself sharing the abundance with others because I can't handle it all. When the determinate tomatoes set their fruit all at once, I'm overwhelmed by what to do with them all. When the cucumber plants produce more than I can eat in a week, I panic over how to use them up. A little bit of foresight goes a long way to fully utilize everything in the garden. Canning, dehydrating, and finding other ways to incorporate veggies in

all my meals is one way to use up what I pick from the garden, but I don't always have time to plan and prepare foods this way.

Canning requires a fair amount of time, which I don't always have. Quick-pickling is easy and fun, but I couldn't possibly consume all those pickles on my own!

I try to bake, roast, and sauce-up all the vegetables in my garden, but when the harvest is bountiful, that's not always enough to get through it all. It's taken a lot of practice to prevent waste, but it still happens. I've had to really sink my teeth into meal planning to maximize my returns and minimize wasted produce. Meal planning, in combination with crop planning, is the surest way to avoid disappointment.

Another way that I incorporate fresh vegetables into my diet is by snacking on them. By munching on raw (or cooked if you prefer) veg, I not only incorporate plenty of healthy nutrients in my daily caloric intake, I also use up otherwise tough to cook with veggies.

## **Garden Snack Ideas**

Here are a few examples of snack ideas along with extra tips for using your harvest:

**Celery:** Whether I'm growing in the garden or snatching some up at the local farm stand, celery is one of my favorite veggie snacks. I love to eat it with peanut butter. If you get sick of snacking on celery snicks, use this veg for flavoring all sorts of dishes, including soups and stews.

**Carrots:** Who doesn't love a freshly picked carrot? Last week, I harvested a patch, and my dogs were close by, eager to delight in this sweet treat. Carrots taste great alone and are the quintessential healthy snack food. Zap them in the food processor if you're in the mood for a more substantial meal

and make a carrot slaw for lunch or to accompany your dinner.

**Tomatoes:** When you think of a snack, you're probably not thinking about salads. But a plate of fresh sliced tomatoes, topped with salt, pepper, and bocconcini cheese is a gourmet-style afternoon indulgence. It's the perfect reward for growing those delicious tomatoes, isn't it? Entertaining guests? Make cherry tomato skewers for easy one-handed eating.

**Cucumbers:** These taste great on their own with a little bit of salt and pepper. It's one of the only ways I enjoy eating cucumber – besides inside a sandwich.

**Snap peas:** If I'm not cutting these up to enjoy inside a stir fry, I'm eating them raw along with other fresh veggies.

**Kale:** Bake these low and slow for a few minutes or pop them inside a dehydrator to make kale chips. Adjust the salt content to your liking. Kale chips are a great alternative to regular chips loaded with saturated fat.

**Berries:** If you're lucky enough to grow any type of berry, boy, do you have a snack-worthy fruit on your hands. I've only started growing berries, so my patches are smaller than I'd like and only churn out a few strawberries at a time. How to enjoy a handful of berries as a snack? Eat them as is, or add them to yogurt or ice cream.

For the frugal gardeners, snacking doesn't have to be an expensive pursuit. Avoid costly, highly-processed foods from the grocery store and enjoy the tasty treasures sitting right in front of you!

*What are your favorite ways to enjoy your veggie snacks? Tell me in the comments!*

**Next week, I'll be back with some meal planning tips to help you use what you grow, along with some suggestions of meal**

*planning tools that I love and use frequently.*

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## 4 Reasons to Plant Flowers in and Around Your Vegetable Garden



For a long time, I thought planting flowers was a pointless and frivolous gardening activity. Sure, they looked nice, but I was much more interested in growing food. Being able to grow frequently eaten foods such as lettuce, tomatoes, and arugula, meant that my grocery bills were lower, and I was even able to share excess produce with friends and family. Growing produce is still the focus of my gardening efforts, but now, I put equal effort into cultivating a balanced ecosystem that includes flowering plants.



## Why plant flowers?

**Aesthetic:** There's no denying that a patch of flowers around the garden looks beautiful. Well placed flowering plants pull together an outdoor space and really allow it to shine. A few containers of brightly colored gerberas on my back deck add a look I couldn't otherwise achieve with simple greenery.

**Attract pollinators:** Flowers are an essential food source for many pollinators, and the colorful blooms will bring bees and other buzzing beneficial insects to the fray. Pick native flowering plants, and each time you step into your outdoor space, you'll notice that your garden is vibrating with energy.

**Attract predatory insects:** Some flowering herbs and plants also attract predatory insects that can help you take a bite out of pest problems – and even avoid them altogether. Catmint, for instance, attracts lacewing insects, which in turn devour pests such as aphids and Japanese beetles. The tiny flowers on this herb also attract bees.

**Enjoy cut flowers for free:** If you're anything like me, you love having a bouquet of fresh-picked flowers on your coffee table or kitchen windowsill. It's a beautiful way to bring the outdoors inside, but buying plants from a flower shop is an expensive purchase that most frugal gardeners aren't able to afford. Even those with a sufficient budget to buy cut flowers are wary of spending money on this type of expense. Planting flowers in your garden allows you to have a steady supply of cut flowers for your home. My favorite are zinnias. Start a few indoors, transplant in the spring and in mid- to late summer you'll be rewarded with a prolific patch of delicate and colorful blooms.

## Annual versus perennial

Plant a variety of flowers including perennial *and* annual

varieties to ensure you have a varied array of blooms. I like to cover the bulk of my flower-designated areas with perennials since they're low maintenance and don't require me to purchase new seed each year. I do enjoy planting a few annual varieties (zinnias, for example), though. Don't be afraid to ask nursery employees for suggestions on what to plant.

When in doubt, pick drought-tolerant perennials, and you can enjoy a flowery display without too much effort!

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## **The No-Cost Way to Increased Tomato Yields: Pruning**



Hi, everyone! Apologies for the late posting.

I've known what I wanted to talk about this week for a while, but honestly, it's tough to explain it well without a visual aid. Pruning tomatoes is one of the tasks that I either excel at or fail miserably to keep up with. I'm either diligent in staking, pruning, and keeping my tomatoes organized and tidy or I forget to stay on top of the chore and end up with sprawling plants.

Here's an excellent pruning guide to help you out with the task this summer:

Different gardeners have different pruning preferences. You can choose to lightly prune your plants or aggressively remove branches as you see fit. With a bit of trial and error, you'll find a method that works for you.

## Why prune tomatoes?

There are a few reasons to keep up with this garden chore:

- **Prevents disease:** Let your tomato plants sprawl on the ground, and they're more likely to pick up disease from contaminated soil.
- **Improves air circulation:** This is especially true if you're planting things closely together (like I do with the Square Foot Gardening method).
- **Better yield:** If your tomato plant is busy throwing its energy into growing big, green leaves, you'll undoubtedly have fewer tomatoes. Pruning help re-route that energy to where it matters: growing big juicy tomatoes!
- **Controls growth:** Pruning prevents your plants from getting out of control, which allows for easier upkeep and maintenance. If your plant growth is left unchecked, foliage may shade nearby plants and completely block the sun for newly emerging seedlings. Pruning regularly also

allows you the opportunity to inspect your plants carefully.

## **When should I not prune?**

Don't bother pruning determinate tomato plants – these are varieties that set all their fruit at once. Pruning will significantly lower your yield.

If you don't feel like pruning, don't bother. There's no rule that says you NEED to. Sure, there are benefits, but you can also grow tasty tomatoes without the effort of pruning.

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## **Dealing with Tomato Blight**



I find it incredible that my garden can handle such intense weather variations. One week it's boiling outside, the next the temperature drops to a balmy 10 degrees celsius overnight. I'm grateful for the respite from the heat, but cooler, wet weather brings along a whole other set of problems, including tomato blight.

### **What is tomato blight?**

Blight actually refers to a collection of fungal diseases that affect most nightshade plants (e.g., potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers). The condition advances rapidly,

turning leaves brown and leaving your plant looking like it's on its last legs. Blight can also affect the main stem of your plant and, in advanced stages, can even affect the fruit.

### **What causes blight?**

There's a downside to cool weather, especially if the air is humid rather than dry. Plant diseases – fungi and bacteria – love damp, moist conditions.

### **Measures to avoid blight**

Prevention is the best cure for any type of garden disease. To stop this fungal infection from spreading among your nightshades do the following:

- **Practice proper crop rotation.** If blight hits your plants this year, planting them in the same location will lead to a predictable outcome.
- **Avoid watering plant foliage.** Don't get the leaves of your plant wet. Water from below, instead.
- **Allow for adequate air circulation.** Space the plants appropriately and prune as needed to ensure your plants aren't squished together. Better airflow ensures that even after heavy rainfall, your plants won't stay humid and moist.
- **Keep leaves off the ground.** Trim and prune the bottom leaves of your tomato plants. If they fall onto the soil, they're more likely come into contact with a fungal infection.
- **Use supports.** Letting your tomato plants sprawl is the lazy gardener's way, but it's also an ideal way for your plants to contract blight. Use stakes or tomato cages to keep your plants off the ground.

### **What happens if my plants are already affected?**

Trim off diseased portions of your plants. If the disease has spread too much and your plant is too far gone, remove it from

your garden. Do not toss it into the compost pile.

Fungicides are another option. I suggest opting for organic products. This solution is best when blight is caught early. Avoid relying on chemicals to solve problems like these. They may work in the short term, but prevention is the best way to avoid long-term issues and spending money down the line.

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## Gardening During a Heatwave



We're currently experiencing another heatwave where I'm located and boy oh boy does it ever make gardening a real chore. I'm incredibly thankful that our home is equipped with A/C, but when the temperature reaches over 100 degrees

Fahrenheit, I hate going outside even if I can cool down when I return inside.

We aren't the only ones suffering in the extreme heat. Pets are vulnerable during these scorchers, *and* garden plants suffer, too. I find it incredibly tough to go outside, but it's in this scorching weather that my garden needs me the most! When it's this hot, plants wilt quicker and need more water than ever. I have to water twice a day to keep them from withering away. I have to provide them with shade – even the plants that love the heat! It's simply too hot for anything to thrive. Production slows, as well. Blossom drop occurs, and I find myself harvesting fewer eggplants, tomatoes, and peppers. Bolt-resistant varieties of lettuce are not shooting up stalks like never before.

During a heatwave, there's plenty to do in the garden, even if I'm wary of stepping outside. Here are some tips to stay safe when gardening during a heatwave:

- **Drink water.** Don't just wait until you get back inside. You never know when a garden task might take longer than expected. Take a water bottle outside with you.
- **Garden in the early morning and late evening.** It may still be hot and humid, but at least you won't have to contend with the sun.
- **Save the heavy lifting for another day.** Unless it's a vitally important task, don't bother with sweat-inducing chores during a heatwave. Keep them for a cooler day. If you must do hard physical labor, avoid doing it during the hottest part of the day.
- **Wear a hat!** Even on cooler days! Keep your noggin' protected from harmful UV rays.
- **Slather on sunscreen.** Yes, even if you're only out for a few minutes. You may end up having a conversation with a neighbor finding yourself doing extra chores. Don't end up outside without sunscreen.
- **Take breaks.** It's that time of year when there's so much



to do. Harvesting, succession sowing, and turning the compost pile. You can't merely put those tasks aside because of the weather, right? That's fine. If there's stuff you need to do, just be sure to take periodic breaks.

- **Listen to your body.** Keep tabs on how you're feeling. Getting dizzy? Are you feeling nauseous? Head inside to a cooler area. Don't risk heat sickness or heatstroke.

Are you worried about your plants during a heatwave? Keep them watered and avoid watering when the sun is out (water will evaporate quickly, and wet leaves increase the chances of sunscald). Harvest at dawn or dusk to avoid stressing your plants. Harvesting in the heat will leave you with limp produce.

Watch the weather. Periods of severe heat and humidity are often accompanied by thunderstorms. Conserve water by strategically watering.

Remember, you can't control the weather! Don't feel like a failure if you incur losses during a heatwave.