BACK TO THE GARDEN

PRUNING TOMATOES, AND VERTICAL CUKES

BY PETER GARNHAM

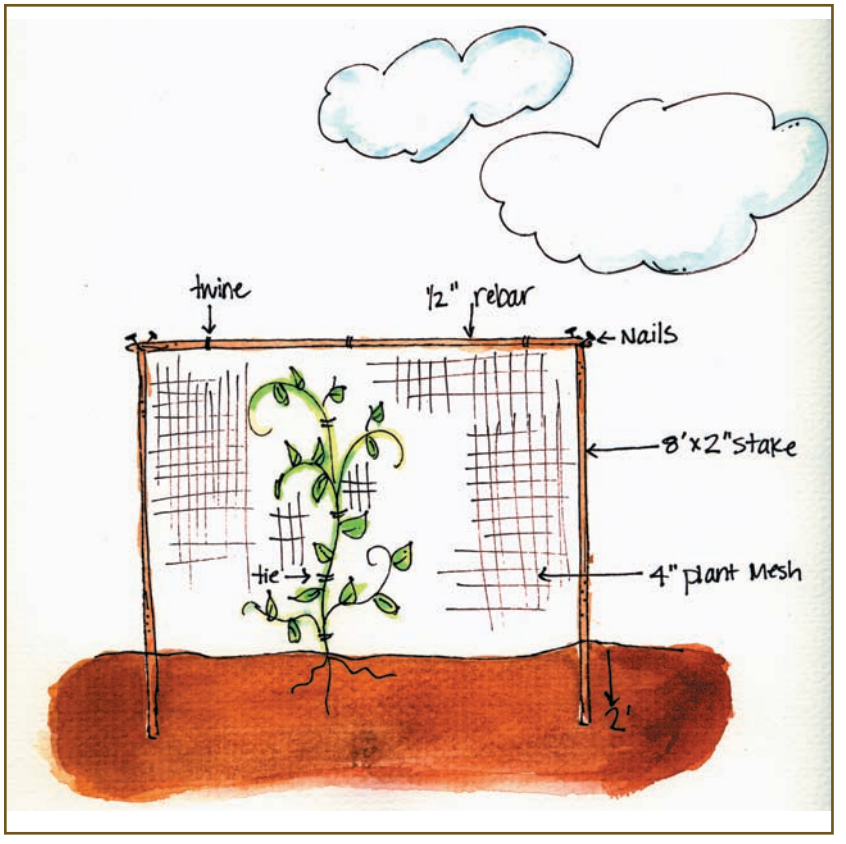

Illustration: Kathy Moore

Millions of gardeners grow tomatoes every year, so it is not surprising that there are many opinions on just about every aspect of tomato culture. Perhaps the most hotly debated topic is whether—or not—to prune away side shoots, called suckers.

The pro-pruning group argues that by removing suckers you concentrate the plant's energy into a single stem, and that this produces larger tomatoes. I am not aware of a serious study of this claim, but in my experience it is not true. Plants of a certain variety produce fruits of a certain size, and that's that. The only way I have managed to get larger fruit is to remove most of the flowers from a cluster, leaving only one or two. That works.

There is, I believe, one sound reason for pruning, and that is close spacing of plants. In a field or garden you can allow two or three feet between plants, but in a hoophouse or greenhouse, tomato plants often grow only 18 inches apart. Since tomatoes are subject to a huge variety of leaf diseases, which air circulation helps prevent, pruning reduces the amount of foliage and allows good air movement. If you want to plant tomatoes closely in a garden—when you bought or raised too many plants for your available space, for example, as I often do—the same principle would hold true.

Dr. Carolyn Male, the heirloom tomato authority who wrote *100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden* and has raised more than a thousand varieties of tomatoes in her upstate New York garden, opposes pruning: "Plants need to photosynthesize to produce energy for root, leaf, and fruit growth . . . by allowing all the plant's foliage to thrive, the plant is better able to photosynthesize. Since most growers experience leaf loss from foliage diseases, I believe it's wise to have the maximum foliage possible."

To which the pruning enthusiasts would answer, "Yes, but you wouldn't get so many foliage diseases if you pruned away the suckers to allow air circulation," and so on. The debate will continue for many years, but for me the deciding factor is how much space I have available.

Another way to make the most of the space in your garden is to grow cucurbits—cukes, melons, zucchini—vertically, instead of allowing them to sprawl all over the place. This has another advantage for a family of plants that is particularly prone to suffer from leaf diseases such as mildews, because it raises them up off the damp ground and allows air to move through the foliage.

What you need is some plant netting, such as you might use for peas or beans, with a roughly four-inch mesh. Get two-inch square stakes, eight feet long, and bury two feet in the ground. Fasten ½-inch rebar (concrete reinforcing bar) across the tops of the stakes. (Drive two nails into the top of each stake to form a V, and rest the rebar in the V.) Hang the netting from the rebar, fasten it with twine, and secure it to the stakes on either side.

Plant the cukes or melons or whatever at the base of the netting. Unlike peas and beans, curcurbits will not climb without your help, although their tentacles will hang on if you show them the way. As the plants grow, train the runners up the netting, fastening them with soft jute twine or plastic tomato rings.

To keep cucumber beetles away for as long as possible, lightweight row-cover fabric can be draped over the plants until they are in full flower, when you will have to remove the cover to allow pollination by insects. The heaviest fruit will need support. Cloth slings (pantyhose is best, but cut-up T-shirts will work!) can be tied to the netting. It might look odd, but it's the only way to get lots of cukes from a small space. □

Peter Garnham is a Cornell Cooperative Extension Master Gardener and a commercial herb and vegetable grower at EECO Farm in East Hampton.