

## A RULE OF THUMB

Thane Dykstra

(1) At first glance, growing a vegetable garden appears to be a relatively simple project involving a few basic steps: raking some ground, digging a few holes, dropping in seeds, covering the holes, sprinkling a little water, watering a few months and, finally, reaping the harvest. For the elite class of super-gardeners, this may be the case; growing vegetables may have become second nature. For the ordinary gardeners of the world, however, growing a vegetable patch often requires precise planning and constant care. Regardless of such care, some people's gardens continue to wither away year after year. The fact is, even under similar environmental conditions, some people's gardens grow better than others, indicating that gardeners themselves may have an influence on their crops. In general, there are three basic types of gardeners who may be classified by "a simple rule of thumb." There are the Green Thumbs, the Yellow Thumbs and the Brown Thumbs, each possessing its own unique characteristics. Though a person may belong to one particular thumb class for his entire life, there have been reports of gardeners in our society who have undergone thumb transplants and upgraded their particular status.

(2) The first group of gardeners, the Green Thumbs, are viewed with envy by their neighbors, probably because their powers rival those of Demeter, not only commanding the elements, but also banishing unwanted weeds. As a matter of principle, the Green Thumb is never seen riding a garden tractor or pushing a rototiller. Instead he prefers the more earthly tools: rakes, hoes and spades. These the Green Thumb wields with the skill and grace of a symphony conductor, carefully throttling the few weeds which defy his powers. The terms "fertilizer" and "insecticide" are foreign to the Green Thumb who speaks only of manure, compost, praying mantises and lady bugs, the organic preservers of a garden.

(3) With its abundant green foliage and plentiful crops, the Green Thumb's garden would put even Adam and Eve to shame. Without benefit of book or manual Green Thumb is able to organize his garden in the best of all possible ways. Plants friendly to each other are always located side by side. The planting dates themselves are spaced far enough apart to provide an enjoyable harvest from early spring to late fall. Though the Green Thumb's garden is not always the largest in the neighborhood, it is the most abundant and meticulously kept. Lying in straight, evenly spaced rows separated only by organic mulch, the plants are full of color and stand at attention while the Green Thumb inspects his sacred plot. The vegetables which come to grow on these plants are beyond comparison, easily exceeding the family portraits that have been framed on their maternal seed package. Even in times other gardeners fail, the Green Thumb is able to produce excellent results. One of the most remarkable

characteristics of the Green Thumb, however, is his altruistic nature which he demonstrates by readily giving out seedlings and vegetables of all varieties.

(4) The second class of gardener is the Yellow Thumb, whose garden, though not as healthy as the Green Thumb's, bears edible produce. Unlike the Green Thumb, the Yellow Thumb does not possess the gift of growing vegetables effortlessly. He unsuccessfully tries to compensate for this deficiency through the use of books and machinery. The Yellow Thumb is often found turning the soil in his garden with a rototiller, saving the hoe to finish off any surviving weeds. The Yellow Thumb often pollutes his garden with commercial fertilizers which unfortunately fail to produce any noticeable effects. This gardener is prone to use small, hand-held insecticide dispensers which deter bugs only by changing the colors of the plants' foliage to a sickening yellow. Despite such "technological advancements" the Yellow Thumb is forced to spend a considerable amount of time in his garden, replanting, watering and weeding. The Yellow Thumb is likely to work diligently in his garden attempting to produce finer vegetables than the year before.

(5) The Yellow Thumb's garden is in many ways the Green Thumb's rough draft. The rows are not as evenly spaced and the mulch which separates them is frequently blown or kicked upon the plants. These gardeners often neglect to stagger their planting dates. Overcrowding and day long harvesting of one crop are the result. Though the seedlings generally emerge from the ground as scheduled, somewhere during the course of spraying and fertilizing, the green foliage magically becomes a spotted yellow. Nevertheless, a number of such spotted plants manage to flourish and give birth to an assortment of vegetables which bear similar spots. Such vegetables, however, tend to be stunted in their growth. It is no coincidence that the Yellow Thumb frequently makes dill pickles with his almost cucumbers. When eaten over the long winter, however, such meager rewards provide enough incentive to lure the Yellow Thumb into planting a garden the following spring.

(6) The final class of gardeners is the Brown Thumbs. The Brown Thumb violates all of the sacred laws of the Great Green Thumb. He races around his garden on a 4-speed, Montgomery Ward lawn tractor, pulling a dual-axle hydraulic rototiller, which, to his surprise, cuts many of the plants' roots. When the dust settles, the Brown Thumb moves in with his second wave of artillery, the dreaded insecticide "Omni-Kill." Even the worms come up to die. For the plants, however, death is long and delayed. Instead of mercifully finishing the plants off with a hoe, the Brown Thumb is afraid of interfering with his golf stroke, and so the plants slowly pine away under the hot summer sun. The Brown Thumb is also a shrewd business person who takes advantage of the best deals at garden centers. By purchasing last year's second grade seeds the Brown Thumb is able to afford a number of plastic ornaments which stand as proud sentinels over the

brown wasteland.

(7) The garden of the Brown Thumb invariably resembles a barren desert with small cacti-like weeds creeping over the entire vegetable patch. The layout of the garden itself bears witness to the Brown Thumb's philosophy that "any garden is better than no garden at all." The rows of plants weave in and out like cars in rush hour traffic. Often there are large gaps between plants and long barren patches where entire rows failed to come up. The few crops that manage to break through the surface, escaping the murderous pressure of the Brown Thumb, are bound to be tough and leathery. Not surprisingly, the pea plants and sweet corn ears yield fewer kernels and seeds than were originally planted. The Brown Thumb is not daunted by his failures, but rather blames the weather or the nursery for his bad luck. Fortunately the Brown Thumb does not lose his taste for California vegetables which are produced in his neighborhood grocery store.