

## Peak Zucchini ...what to do with overabundance

By Thanksgiving most people with small gardens have already forgotten the “peak zucchini” or “peak tomato” problems of overabundance that may have caught them off guard in the fall. The usual inclination is to push the occasional drastic choices one has to make out of mind, only to be reminded the next time miss-judging the annual harvest timing intrudes on otherwise simple chores. This particular combination of emotional and practical dilemmas of garden overabundance, though, touch on the universal problems of sudden overabundance.

In lots of circumstances people seem curiously clumsy in dealing with it. Sometimes we even seem to deal with sudden overabundance as if out of dread necessity, instead of eager pleasure, to then forget about the issues thrust on us as soon as possible. Shrugging it off and not thinking it through may leave us to respond to it poorly, again and again, as with the eruptions of wealth that generally precede financial panics.

“Peak zucchini” then, can be a model of the overabundance problem, how we deal with bounty that overshoots our expectations and the rapid responses needed, the basics of “peak anything”. The urgency associated with it comes from our being naturally unprepared. It’s demanding to have your environment suddenly erupt with too much of something, even if it’s something you very much wanted. For zucchini, the basic strategy is quite simple, either you nip it in the bud and pick them while they’re small enough, or you pick them while you have enough friends to give them away too.

That’s sort of the upper and lower bounds of the “strategic environmental intervention” needed. You try to catch the eruption in mid-stream using some careful timing. Done right, sharing the bounty that comes to you that way is a good glue for social relations as well as a way to turn one’s own useless surpluses into everyone’s gain.

The key, I think, is that surpluses are actually useless! They force you to look beyond immediate habits, *until you look around your environment for some other good use*. Finding who needs a gift could be rewarding, maybe result in other exchanges. I think needing to find how to not waste an overabundance could be the origin of trade and money, needing to search for how to get rid of valuable things when you have more than you can use.

There are examples of traditional human cultures that use no other kind of money. The salmon ceremonies of First Nations along the northwest coast of North America exemplify that use of “money”, employing their annual “peak fish” bounty from the yearly salmon runs, as a center of tribal culture relations. When overabundance comes to you in the form of an easily transported, high value, perishable good, it’s hard to avoid seeing the necessity of finding someone else to share it with.

Still, whether perishable, portable or neither, an unexpected bounty is a reward with problems, mysteriously produced by the earth, an eruption of wealth usually in return for your own investment paying off beyond your needs. They come as if by some other hand and have a timing and content of their own. The investment is in one form, the rewards returned in another form.

The amazing eruption of energy uses and technologies of the past couple centuries are another example. It's different in scale and time span, a societal learning process more than a personal one, with individuals having only a limited view, involving our vast inventiveness and curious way of double book money accounting for both current business and future promises to expand ever faster. Well, maybe that's a long, not short, list of differences. Still, you have the same basic elements, an initial investment of one kind, the idea of energy machines to do tasks, and an erupting bounty of another kind, a richly entertaining consumer culture. Our wealth overshoot our ability know what to do with it, and has become dangerously unmanageable.

If not for catching us off guard it would be part of the normal "bump on a curve" life cycle (,) of beginnings and endings, the usual path of discovering and adapting to any new use of things as its resources go through their Hubert curve of supply limits. That's the general map for energy system events: development, climax, decay. Our tragic reaction, we're discovering, was to manage the growing surplus mainly to multiply more growing surpluses as fast as possible, as if to be without end. Maybe that's a little like a gardener leaving the zucchinis to grow till all the fruit are too big to give away.

Our preoccupation with it went even further though, to continuing to accelerate our expanding uses as the limits of supply became evident, using improved extraction technique, as if that would forestall the resource decline. Unfortunately that both hastens the approaching end of supply, in fact, and makes the end of useful supplies as abrupt as we can make it. Maybe that's a little like selling shares in leaving zucchini to grow till the fruit has rotted on the ground.

Why people behave so very strangely seems connected to the semi-magical beliefs we have. Our cultural belief systems are formed historically around rules that seem to work OK for long periods. Not paying attention to how the situation changes then causes huge errors of judgment. We have a deep faith in hard work and efficiency, for example, and apply it to solving nearly all problems. Applying hard work and efficiency to the old rules of multiplying surplus, though, is today profoundly counter productive. Today we're seeking efficiency blindly, to actually using up our cheap energy sources as fast as possible. We seem to have things to learn about unexpected surpluses.

We need better views of the process, to study the curves that describe the experience as a whole, watching for turning points that signal the new situations coming. Non-linear eruptions of change greatly narrow the opportunity for choosing outcomes. You need get the timing just right, peak zucchini rule #1! One can also say that only fools use their surpluses to just multiply their surplus,

ignoring the situation change. It always wastes the whole harvest, and probably also costs you your friends, peak zucchini rule #2.

On the scale of world economic culture, of course, telling a banker or bureaucrat to think how they would manage an overabundance of zucchini won't get you far. For a couple hundred years our culture has been multiplying its investments in energy technology to multiply more energy technology, a great bounty but without purpose. We have not yet seen that having multiplying surpluses, whether measured in btu's or dollars, is a temporary gift. We might find a better use for the bounty, a better use, and make something lasting, rather than just burn it up on changing ever faster for change sake till nothing works at all. We're belatedly beginning to see the dead end to that approaching. It may be late to react in time, yes, but still the right response is to see how we might better use the abundance still at our command, as part of our way of Thanksgiving....

What a savings!