



How to Protect the

EDIBLE GARDEN

from Hail Damage

What Causes Hail?



Hail is made of layers of ice formed when drops of water freeze above strong, unstable updrafts produced by thunderstorm clouds. When the stones become too heavy to remain buoyed by the updrafts, they drop to the ground.



Your geographical area may be more prone to hailstorms during certain months of the year – in Canada, this is usually between May and October. Hailstones can vary in size from five millimetres (0.2 inches) to extremely damaging golf ball- or even baseball-sized chunks. (The largest hailstone recorded in Canada fell in Cedoux, Saskatchewan, in 1973. It was a whopping 290 grams (0.6 pounds))! Large amounts of hailstones can pile up like snowdrifts on the ground. Although weather forecasters can usually predict the potential for hail, sometimes the storms come up quickly – within a matter of minutes, without warning – and the unprotected garden can be decimated.

Dealing with the Aftermath of Hail



Plants with large leaves, such as squash and leafy greens, may be completely shredded by a hailstorm. Wait until the ice melts before assessing the damage. First of all: take a deep breath and try not to get too discouraged. Chances are good that the plants will rebound quickly, although they may not look as blemish-free as they did before. Clean up any plant parts that have completely separated from the plants, but do not cut back any foliage or stems if they are still attached. Even if they are torn up and pockmarked, those green leaves are necessary for photosynthesis. The plants need them now more than ever. If, in two or three weeks, you notice that some plants haven't survived, you can remove them, but be sure to wait a sufficient length of time before making that final decision.

Keep the plants as stress-free as possible. Maintain a regular watering schedule. Do not fertilize right after a hailstorm - wait a couple of weeks, then resume your usual fertilizing routine. If you haven't applied mulch to your edible garden, you may wish to add a five centimetre (two-inch) layer of clean straw or herbicide-free dry grass clippings. This will help conserve moisture at the base of the plants and maintain a more consistent soil temperature.

Plants that are well-established will usually make a faster and more complete recovery from hail than new seedlings that have just been transplanted. If it is early in the season and you lose your new plants, don't despair; you may have time to obtain new starts from another gardener or to purchase some at a garden centre and replant your garden.

Monitor your plants for pests and diseases, as damaged plants may be more susceptible to attack. Remove any developing fruit that has been damaged by hail, as it may invite pest insects to chow down.



Preventing Hail Damage



If the area you live in frequently receives hailstorms during the growing season, ensure you have protection – either semi-permanent or temporary – at the ready. If you are home, you may have enough time to pop covers, such as large, overturned plant pots, pails, or plastic tubs, on top of prized individual plants and secure them with tent pegs or landscape pins. In a pinch, temporary tents may be made with old bedsheets and wooden stakes hammered into the ground. Place plant caddies with casters beneath heavy containers so that you can simply roll the plants into a sheltered location before the hailstones fly.



If you aren't able to dash out and cover your plants every time hail is in the forecast, consider erecting structures that can be left up all season. If you have a raised garden bed or in-ground beds, it may be beneficial to set up hoop tunnels covered in floating row cover fabric or fine mesh screen to keep hailstones out. Pop-up garden tents covered in fabric netting are also useful.



