

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #47 Intensive Vegetable Gardening

The concept of growing our own fresh vegetables appeals to most of us, but few people have the time to put in and care for a big vegetable garden. The solution is obvious. Put in a tiny one, but make it as efficient and productive as possible.

To get the most out of your garden:

- Choose wisely what you will grow. (The fact sheet “Deciding What to Plant” may help.)
- Prepare the soil deeply by double digging and add the proper amendments. (The fact sheet “Soil Testing & Improvement” may help.)
- Use transplants whenever possible. (The fact sheet on “Transplants” may help.)
- Use your space wisely by growing up, by intercropping and by doing successive cropping.
- Mulch, mulch, mulch.

The first three points are covered in other fact sheets, so we can dismiss them quickly. Choose to grow crops that are valuable (herbs, asparagus, mesclun), productive (beans, summer squash, rhubarb,) and more flavorful fresh from your garden (tomatoes, peas leaf lettuce). Prepare the soil well. Use transplants whenever you can. Learn to grow them yourself. Seeds give us weeks of bare soil, so the weeds can move in. Transplants save you weeks or months, depending on the crop.

GROWING UP

In a small garden every foot of soil is important. Don't let crops sprawl. Train the

tomatoes up poles and cucumber vines up support frames.

Winter squash and pumpkins take up lots of space, so you may choose not to grow them. If you do grow squash, tie them up onto a trellis. If needed, you can support the heavy fruit with slings.

Pole beans and climbing peas will give more production per square foot than bush cultivars. Provide support, even for short vines, so that they don't fall over onto the neighboring crop.

SPACING AND INTERCROPPING

Assuming that you have prepared your soil well, you should plant in blocks not rows. By double digging and adding lime, organic matter and fertilizer, plant roots can go deep instead of sideways into their neighbor's territory. Plants should be grown close enough together that their leaves touch, but not so close that they compete with each other for sunlight, water or nutrients. Consider the space needed by the mature plant, when setting out transplants. Seeded crops will need to be thinned to the final spacing.

Crops that need a big area eventually (like squash, tomatoes or cabbage) can be planted with an intercrop (such as leaf lettuce, green onions, spinach, mustard or radishes). Intercrops are fast-growing crops that can grow between large plants before the big ones need their full space. Intercropping allows you to get two crops out of the same space.

SUCCESSIVE PLANTING

Try to keep your garden space full of crops at all times. Your garden will produce lots of vegetables in the summer. With planning, it can provide fresh vegetables all year. When one crop is harvested or past its peak, take it out and plant another crop. This successive cropping gives you much more food from the same amount of land. There are different kinds of successive plantings that can be grouped by when you are going to eat the produce.

Summer crops: Most are sown as the first crop in the spring. Many fast crops can be sown one after another, so that you get several crops in summer. [Green onions, lettuce, mustards, radishes, etc.]

Fall crops: After spring crops are finished in-mid-summer, plant a second crop for fall. Some of these can be left in the garden for winter eating. [Beans, peas, beets, lettuce, mustard, turnips, spinach, rutabagas, cabbage, broccoli, greens, etc.]

Winter crops: Plants don't grow much during the short, cold days of winter. To eat vegetables in winter, you must plant them in warm summer or fall months. Once they have grown, these hardy crops will hold well in your garden to provide food for winter. [Carrots, collards, corn salad, green onions, kale, leeks, mustard, potatoes, spinach, Swiss chard, turnips. etc.]

Spring crops: A few crops can be started in late summer or fall. They grow a little, but stay small through winter. In spring they finish growing and produce extra-early harvests. Often certain varieties of a vegetable over-winter better than others. [Broccoli, cauliflower, cilantro, garlic, greens, onions, spinach.]

Growing successive crops, especially over winter, will require good cultural practices. Each time you replant, add compost and a balanced fertilizer to keep the soil healthy. Don't over-fertilize in the fall. Too much nitrogen will cause plants to be less cold hardy.

A floating row cover or clear plastic row cover over hoops will keep crops warmer. Giving crops protection will allow you to grow earlier in the spring and later in the fall. Many over-wintering crops will do better under row covers as well. If you use plastic, be sure it is well vented.

MULCH

Organic mulch is a busy gardener's best friend.

- Mulch keeps the soil moisture from evaporating, so that you won't have to water as often.
- Mulch shades the soil to prevent weed seeds from germinating. When weeds do grow, the mulch makes them easier to pull.
- Mulch keeps veggies cleaner, since soil doesn't splash up onto them.
- Mulch can be turned under in the fall or the following spring to add organic matter to the soil.

Organic mulch shades the soil, so don't apply it until the soil has a chance to warm up, especially around heat-loving crops.