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Oh, Grow Up!



By Twinflower Wilkie, WSU Ferry County Extension Master Gardener

Trellising and other vertical forms of gardening are often recommended for those with small gardens. “Small” doesn’t describe my garden. So for years I thought, with all that ground to cover, why not let my garden sprawl all over the place? After all, it’s a lot of work to set up trellises, and have you seen what they cost?

Well, there’s more to vertical gardening than space saving. Benefits for you:

- Hide an ugly fence or boring wall
- Use columnar trees to block the wind
- Reach plants to take care of them more easily
- Easier on the body
- More accessible for those unable to bend or kneel.

Benefits for the plants:

- Air circulates freely
- Foliage stays clean and dry meaning less mildew and other diseases.
- Pests usually don’t climb very high
- Vegetables are easier to see and harvest, and won’t lie rotting on the ground under the leaves of the plant.
- Taller plants give shade to plants that need it.

Vegetable trellises can often be devised from supplies on hand. Be inventive-an old futon frame, fireplace screen or dead branches can all support plants. If you must, buy supplies at a farm and feed or building supply store. Look for fencing or cattle panels rather than the decorative trellising in the garden section. It will be stouter and cost less overall.

Pole beans give you more beans over a longer season than bush beans with lots of varieties to try for eating fresh or for shelling and drying. I used to grow them in hills and use teepee style supports, but I had trouble harvesting the beans in the center. If you have livestock panels or even wire fencing, you can devise a very handy trellis for them. Pound a couple t-posts into the ground on each side, bend the panel into an arch shape and fasten it to the posts using zip ties. This style of trellis lets the beans dangle down from above, easy to find. Squash, gourds and melons also benefit from being off the ground but they will need supports or cloth slings to keep the fruits from getting too heavy for the vines.

Peas and pole beans started me on trellising. Then the chickens discovered that they love cucumbers and the cucumbers were spread out on the ground, easy to reach, so now I grow the cucumbers on trellises made from suckers I prune from the filbert trees. I make my pea supports the same way, stringing baling twine tightly between the sticks. Next I started trellising tomatoes. Tomato cages are not adequate for the larger tomato varieties. So my husband and I bent an 8 foot high length of wire fencing into a zigzag shape, held in place with t-posts, along which I plant a row of tomatoes, alternating them from side to side. The tomatoes require regular tying to the fencing using zip ties. I leave the ties loose and keep adding more as the tomatoes grow. Leave space to walk on both sides of the tomato row.

I plant shade tolerant crops like lettuce and other salad greens at the base of my trellised crops, leaving enough space for air circulation and plant care.

Grape vines are heavy. They grow well on arbors or pergolas which provide strong support and a pleasant shady spot for relaxing with a yummy cluster of grapes. I just grow mine on my fence corner where there's cross bracing.

Raspberries and other brambles have as many styles of trellising as there are gardening books and articles on growing berries. I personally like the method that my husband devised for me. He strung baling twine between hooks that reach from one support to the next. I can unhook the strings, allowing me to get at the plants when it's time to cane them.

Ornamental vines vary in their need for support. Grow tall heavy vines on arbors, arches, pergolas or strong fences. Remember to keep them under control- some vines can be invasive.

My next project will be a vertical strawberry wall. I'm tired of crawling on my hands and knees to pick my strawberries, and I just happen to have some spare chicken wire and a bank that needs covered, so I plan to use posts to hold the chicken wire in place against the bank, fill in the gap with compost enriched soil and tuck the strawberry plants into the holes in the wire. I will water from above with misters. I hope it works well and I can pick my berries without kneeling.

So good luck in your garden this year and please, grow up!

Resources:

<https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2079/2014/02/VerticalGardening.pdf> Garden Mastery Tips from Clark County, Vertical Gardening
greenthumbs.cedwvu.org/vertical_gardening/

To yield more information contact Ferry County WSU Master Gardeners with garden practice questions. 509-775-5225, x1116 or email shannon.vestal@wsu.edu, 350 E. Delaware Ave. #9 Republic, WA 99166 in the basement of the Courthouse.

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