

A Better Way of Gardening

Does anyone know the real reason people garden? Why do *you* want to garden and grow vegetables? Most surveys show that the majority of people who garden say they want that special homegrown flavor and the satisfaction of growing their own vegetables. Others grow their own food to save money, and still other people garden just to have a nice hobby that provides pleasure and pride. The pleasures of gardening are many—getting outdoors, exercising, putting your hands in the soil, growing things, and the special pride of accomplishment that comes with the harvest. Many gardeners want to experience the feeling of being self-sufficient or at least partly so.

Also, they want to have some control over what they eat—particularly to have fresh, wholesome food that doesn't contain additives or preservatives, that isn't contaminated by pesticide residues, and that hasn't been grown from genetically engineered seed. All of these are good reasons for gardening. It is truly one of America's most popular leisure activities. Of course, for homesteaders and other people who garden on a larger scale, it's a way of life and a means of subsistence.

WHY I LOOKED FOR A BETTER WAY

In order to satisfy your gardening desires and goals, whatever they may be, it's important to be successful in what you're doing. After all, the final harvest is the true goal of gardening. And growing plants in a neat, attractive, weedless garden can help lead to that harvest goal.

If your garden stays neat and productive throughout the entire growing season, consider yourself one of the rare few. You have to remember that a very high percentage of us gardeners (probably almost half) aren't determined to have a successful garden no matter how much time and work it takes. The *average* gardener starts out each year with high hopes, great ambition and energy, and a desire



This view of my garden shows the pleasing contrast of plant forms, textures, and appearance created by the many small squares of a square foot garden. A garden this attractive doesn't have to be hidden "way out back."

for a really big, well-kept garden. But other warm-weather activities seem to get in the way of the garden work, and it soon becomes neglected, overrun with weeds and pests. By the end of the season, there might be enough tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers to make the whole effort seem worthwhile, but all the other crops that couldn't survive the neglect will have been overrun by the weeds or bolted to seed before they could be harvested. When I ran a community garden in our neighborhood in the late 1970s, I discovered that, except for those belonging to dedicated or tireless workers, most of the gardens turned into unattended, weed-filled messes soon after summer was under way. I decided there had to be a better way, and I went about creating a new system that is so simple and easy that anyone can enjoy a weed-free garden all year and produce a continuous harvest. That system is the square foot garden.

The Pitfalls of Conventional Gardening

My summer of observations at our community garden taught me several important lessons that guided my thinking as I developed my gardening system.

I obtained a small plot of land for our organization that I had fenced, manured, rototilled, fertilized, and staked out into small individual plots for rental to anyone who wanted to garden. The program was very popular and well attended at the beginning of each year. In spring that old planting urge infected everyone, and people flooded to the garden, lining up well in advance to sign up for the plots. See if this description of what I observed doesn't sound familiar. The sight of that recently tilled, rich brown soil was a tonic on a warm sunny day in early spring. People couldn't wait to get out to their plots and start raking, digging, and planting. What a beehive of activity! Actually, it reminded me more of a recently disturbed ants' nest. People were everywhere, scurrying here and there, bending, digging, sitting, walking, children were running around, and there was lots of shouting and laughing—everyone was having a wonderful time! We were all returning to the bosom of Mother Earth and loving every minute of it. Rows were laid out, furrows were dug, and packet after packet of seeds was poured out into the rich, damp soil. Our heads danced with visions of all those wonderful vegetables we would soon be harvesting.

By the time everyone left and I closed the gate, a glance back showed me a scene that looked like an army had just done battle there. Our carefully laid-out garden was a field of footprints, cluttered with forgotten tools and the usual debris that civilization leaves in its wake. But everyone went home happy. Some of the gardeners (the pint-size ones), of course, stayed longer than they wanted—you know how impatient children are. "When will the seeds start sprouting?" "When are we going home?" "I'm tired." "I have to go to the bathroom." "I'm thirsty." "Can we get an ice cream cone now?" "*When are we going home?*" But nevertheless, we all did enjoy ourselves and couldn't wait till next week!

Spring Fever Doesn't Last

Unfortunately, the next week brought rain and gloom. Not many of us returned, but luckily the bad weather lasted only a few days. Soon everyone came drifting back, and the following Saturday the gang was out in force again. This time, they didn't stay as long, and I noticed there weren't as many children in attendance. However, the following week participation and excitement were renewed because most of the seeds had sprouted, and long rows of beautiful, young green leaves were visible in all the plots. Some people started thinning and transplanting; others just stood and admired all that green. Unfortunately, a lot of green was also showing between the rows,

too. So some of the group started weeding, but others were busy planting transplants bought at the local nursery.

By the following week, the crowd had settled down to a more or less steady group. Oh, everyone came at one time or another during the week. But you could begin to see which gardens were going to prosper. Some people had already called me to say they were moving, doing something else on Saturday, or had developed a bad back and couldn't continue the garden. That was no problem; we had a waiting list of anxious gardeners who would be happy to take over their plots. But of 100 gardeners who started, about 20 dropped by the wayside within 2 months. By that time spring was well into the warm weather, and *everything* grew like crazy, including the weeds.

Overplanted and Overwhelmed

Everyone was having trouble keeping up with the weeding, watering, and thinning. It was difficult to find time to do all three, and thinning those long rows of thickly planted seeds began to take last place on the priorities list. When we finally did get around to thinning, the crowded plants were spindly and overgrown. You couldn't pay anyone to take a few extra lettuce or cabbage plants because everyone had so many. Between our reluctance to thin out the lush green rows and the necessity of killing young seedlings that were not needed, many of us just left our rows unthinned. It was the last thing on our minds. After all, there were weeds to pull, new tomato plants to put in, stakes to pound into the ground, cucumber and squash seeds to plant. The lettuce and cabbage would just have to get thinned next week.

By early summer only the most serious, dedicated gardeners were keeping up their plots, even if they had to fight their way in at times. The others had picked some scrawny lettuce and a few overgrown radishes—only a few! Most of my colleagues planted half a package of seeds in a 10-foot row before I could stop them. That's more than 200 radishes! Of course, they were planted so close together that most didn't grow any bigger than a long, skinny root. But some of the plants, despite their crowding, managed to form nice little bulbs, which grew to golf ball size before being harvested. The unharvested radishes continued to grow, and soon we saw pretty white flower-stalks rising above the radish rows.

Summer brought the tomatoes. What a glorious crop we were going to have! Everyone planted tomatoes. Of the 100 plots, 98 contained tomatoes. They are truly America's favorite vegetable. But you should have seen the assortment of stakes and supports everyone was using.

It was a comic tragedy. The comic part (the tragedy would come later) was watching the creative-minded among us propping up their tomatoes with a motley assortment of things like old fishing poles and lines or drapery rods tied with venetian-blind cords. Other people went in the opposite direction and built the most elaborate supports you could imagine—one was constructed of long bamboo poles lashed together in a massive and complex structure that looked formidable enough to replace the Great Wall of China. But despite all the odd, elaborate supports, the tomatoes continued to outgrow whatever people installed.

I remember one plot in particular that was planted in nothing but tomatoes—enough plants for half an acre, all crowded into a tiny community garden plot. The owners reflected on how much they expected to put up in the form of sauce, soup, juice, whole, and quartered tomatoes. But by August, they couldn't even get into their plot, much less try to tie up the plants. One particular weekend I remember talking to them after they had picked a bushel and a half of tomatoes and wondered what on earth they were going to do with them all. At that time of the year, all the people I knew were in the same predicament. We all found ourselves with so much harvest we were actually embarrassed and had no idea what we were going to do with it all.

Fortunately, for many of us that only happens for a few weeks out of the year with most vegetables. Nature has a way of helping out. Just when you're so inundated with zucchini squash that your non-gardening neighbors close their curtains when you walk down the street, along comes the squash vine borer and zap go your plants. Other years, when you can't eat the cucumbers fast enough to keep ahead, the plants wilt overnight, and the season is over. And the spring vegetables have a habit of going to seed all at once. Just when you were admiring your long rows of nice lettuce heads, they all shoot up and bolt to seed within a week. When it happens, you resolve that next year you'll pick them sooner, before they get full size. We all fall victim to such good intentions.

Our good intentions back then sometimes made things even worse. Growing and eating microgreens and baby vegetables wasn't the popular trend that it is now. We were very reluctant to pick half-grown, half-size vegetables, even though we'd read the advice to thin our crops because the thinnings are great in salad and picking them makes room for the other plants to grow. We found it almost impossible to actually do. We'd all been brought up in this great country of ours to think that bigger is better. (Today's gardeners have the advantage on this front because they've learned the health advantages

of eating tender young vegetables, and also because glamorous chefs in magazines and on TV extol the wonderful flavor and appearance of baby vegetables.)

I found myself wondering whether the problems I observed in our community garden were unique or universal. So I asked around and started really noticing and visiting homes and gardens all around the area. I found that most of them were in the same condition, and the owners complained about the same problems I was observing. Reflecting on my own gardening experiences in various parts of the country, I realized this was par for the course. Since then, my travels and lectures in many states have convinced me that overplanting and a lack of thinning are universal problems.

A Sad End to the Season

Needless to say, by September our community garden was a terrible mess. It was overgrown with weeds, and plants sprawled everywhere. Fewer than half of the plots were still being tended. Oh, lots of us still came around to pick whatever was ripe (or, more often, overripe), but the dedicated and determined few had dwindled to fewer than 30 of our original 100. Then came the heavy winds and rains of September storms. Down went all the tomatoes. Over went all the peppers and eggplants. What a mess! Stakes snapped, cages overturned, unsupported stems bent and twisted. It was so discouraging that the faithful 30 dropped to 20 overnight. But we 20 were still determined to carry on. However, by the time Labor Day was over and school started, everyone became deeply involved in PTA, weekend parties, football games on TV, raking leaves, Sunday school, and all the other activities we crowd into our busy lives. After all, you only have enough time for so many organizations and activities. Then one rainy Saturday at our regular morning garden clinic, seven people showed up. Seven! When last spring we had more than 150!

A SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Well, that was it for me. If gardening had such appeal that so many people wanted to try it, but fewer than 5 percent of them lasted the season, something was wrong. There had to be a better way. I began to question all of our gardening methods and procedures. Why do we plant an entire packet of seeds all at once and then have to go back and thin most of them out? Why do we thin plants to stand 3, 6, and 12 inches apart in the row, but then leave 2 to 3 feet between rows? Why do we plant so thickly that we have to thin at all? Why do we

dig or rototill our soil to make it nice and loose, then walk all over it and pack it down? Why do we let the summer vine crops spread out and occupy so much land, land that takes fertilizing, cultivating, weeding, and watering? I spent an entire year trying to find answers to those questions.

What I Discovered

To make a year-long story short, I couldn't find any answer to my questions other than "that's the way we've always done it." I consulted all the experts, read all the books and magazines, and dug up all the pertinent information that I could find. What I did conclude was that most of our home gardening methods had their origins in commercial agricultural practices.

Home Gardeners Aren't Farmers

Farmers who have had to become increasingly dependent on animals and, later, machines rather than hand labor need wide-open paths between plant rows in order to get the tractor in to plant, cultivate, fertilize, and harvest. But we poor home growers aren't farmers, and we don't have tractors. We do have a lot of hand labor available, however. In fact, that's all we have. In addition, most of us have just a small backyard garden in which to putter around and raise a few crops.

The United States Department of Agriculture's county agriculture extension services tended to teach and promote what their big brothers, the state universities, were researching—and that was commercial agricultural practices. That was fine for the large-scale growers, but it just didn't meet the needs of the millions of home gardeners in this country. What they needed was a simple gardening method that would produce a lot of harvest in a small space.

Several gardening systems had been introduced in the United States that did just that—produced a lot of food in a little space. But when I looked at them carefully, I found that they were still geared to a fairly large operation. The French intensive method with its broad, raised beds; scatter-seeding in wide rows; Chinese raised beds; and all the others either were derived from commercial farming methods in other countries or were designed for very large gardens using special power equipment.

A System on the Right Scale

Well, that was enough of a challenge for me. I had retired from business, and with my engineering background, my observations at

our community garden, and my experience teaching and writing about gardening, I set out to devise that easy, no-work, foolproof, continual-harvest garden method that would work in a small space for beginners and experts alike. And square foot gardening was the result.

If you're a beginner, you'll soon become an expert using my system. And if you are already an expert, or at least a seasoned gardener, if you try my method with an open mind, you'll soon become a gourmet gardener growing the best crops with the least amount of work. In essence, I'm going to show you a way that will still allow you to get outdoors, get your hands in the soil, and produce a good harvest so you have all you want to eat but without a lot of effort or expense. In fact, square foot gardening will save you at least 80 percent of the space, time, and money normally needed to garden and at the same time will produce a better and more continuous harvest with less work. You're going to eliminate all of your thinning, most of the weeding, and a lot of your watering and will do it all in only one-fifth of the area you now need for gardening. It will cost much less because there are no elaborate structures, tools, or equipment to buy. It may sound fantastic or unrealistic. As you begin to understand this simple system, you'll see that it's mostly just a lot of common sense, and you'll join the millions of other square foot gardeners who are enjoying gardens that are manageable, beautiful, and productive all season long.