

Companion Planting: So Happy Together!

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Many people think of organic gardening as growing without the use of pesticides or herbicides. This is obviously a fundamental part of organics, however, what many do not understand is that it is more than simply a switch from conventional chemicals to OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute) approved materials. Organic gardening is composed of numerous aspects that make up a whole interconnected system. This system relies upon insects, birds, shade, sun, and all other aspects of a living and working community. By growing numerous types of crops you create habitats for beneficial insects or animals, deter problem pests, and enrich your soil to create a living ecosystem of beneficial bacteria and helpful fungi.

Companion planting is not a new idea to the gardening world. There is evidence of farmers using these same techniques dating back to ancient Roman times. Many people are familiar with the idea of planting the "Three Sisters," a Native American technique that combines corn, squash, and beans. These are time-tested planting methods that some dismiss as old wives tales. They would rather plant in organized, monoculture plots that tend to have the same appearance as different color cars parked in a mall parking lot.

By planting only one crop or separating crop by type, you are actually creating a situation that requires a dependence on pesticides or herbicides, organic or not. If you examine a wooded forest lot or a marsh that has not been infringed upon by humans, you will see an interrelated system that works in natural harmony within itself. There are bugs that feed the birds, small mammals that maintain a manageable level of ground growth, and larger mammals that manage the level of smaller ones; the system requires no external inputs. This is the type of environment that can be created in one's garden space, making it harmonious for the birds and the bees, while providing a peaceful retreat for family and friends to enjoy.

A companion planting plan integrates Mother Nature's traits as well as your choice of crops. Some underlying techniques in companion planting include:

- Mix up monocrops. If you want to grow a lot of one crop (tomatoes seem to be the choice in many gardens), plant several small plots in various areas of your garden and mix the crop with one other vegetable or flower.
- Interplant herbs and flowers. By planting flowers and herbs such as marigold, mint or basil, among your vegetables, you can attract beneficial insects and birds, which are natural predators to those pests that eat your brassica leaves. Flowers and herbs can also confuse pests and deter them from finding your prize crop.
- Provide refuge for beneficials. Create habitats in your garden for creatures that prey on those pesky ones. Such beneficials include toads, lizards, snakes, birds and various insects. These organisms need food, water, shelter and breeding grounds in order to find a happy home in your garden. Groundcovers, hedgerows, rock piles, and perennial plants provide needed shelter. Birdbaths and bird feeders also encourage necessary critters.
- Use organic pesticides as the last resort. Many of the OMRI approved chemicals may be safer; however, they still have some toxic residues that can harm the natural

balance in your garden. They work very well at killing the pests, but they can also harm helpful insects like butterflies and bees.

- Know your weeds. Identify the weeds and wildflowers that pop up in your garden space and learn which ones attract native beneficial organisms. It is okay to leave a few of them growing in your garden (as long as you do not let them go to seed).

Resources

Sustainable Gardening Tips

sustainable-gardening-tips.com/Companion-Planting-Combinations-For-The-Family-Garden.html

Companion Planting Charts

attra.ncat.org

Search "companion planting"

Great Garden Companions, Sally Jean Cunningham, Rodale Books, 2000.

Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening, Louise Riotte, Storey Publishing, 1998.

Plant yarrow along borders or near paths to enhance the essential oil production of herbs.

Eggplant and beans are good garden partners.

Aromatic plants next to cabbage such as rosemary and mint will help deter cabbage worms.

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