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The Beginnings of a Permaculture Vegetable Garden

Whether you are a new gardener or an experienced one, there is always information out there that may help you have the best vegetable garden ever. The following information was taken from an article written by Wes Ozier, a permaculturist and gardener. He interviewed a certified organic farmer named Adam Nordfors who was also a former Arcosanti Land Use Manager whose recommendations to Wes are also included in this article.

Sustainable Gardening and Landscaping
By Wes Ozier

Before you begin your garden, you should walk your yard and study the land, note how the sun interacts with the ground and how the rain water flows across the surface. You should think about how you want to interact with your garden: do you want to sit back and enjoy looking at it from a certain angle or do you want to hang out in your garden during the summer time?

Once you have walked your land and decided how you want to interact with your garden, you should begin to create the patches where you will plant. These patches can be any shape, but it is recommended that they be no more than five feet across. (for ease in working in them as well as harvesting) Your patches should be dug down into the ground about four or five inches. Before you dig your patches, pre-mulch your garden areas by adding compost or mulch to the soil. Any extra soil can be used to create berms and swales that can guide rain water flow across your yard into your garden patches. Once the mulch is incorporated into the soil and you have dug up your patches, you are ready to plant seeds and plants (until you have built up several years of improved soil, organic fertilizers should be added).

There are many designs, philosophies, strategies and techniques that gardeners use, and over time you will develop your own style. The following ideas will give you direction on how to make a basic garden

system that will work for you. Over time, you can develop your own techniques and create a garden as unique as you are.

For first time gardeners, start with the following 'plant palette'—beans, carrots, cucurbits (which are plants like cucumbers, squash and pumpkins), radishes and tomatoes. These will provide a healthy diverse group of plants for your menus, and the leaves of cucurbits can be big and beautiful (to add character and contrasts to your garden). You can also plant sunflowers which will produce edible seeds for you or the birds.

First plant radishes and carrots in rows about two inches or so apart, and remember that rows do not have to be in a straight line; in fact they should follow the shapes and lines of your patches. Sprinkle the carrot seeds liberally throughout your rows, plant a radish every few inches in the rows. Your radishes will be ready to harvest in about three weeks. A few weeks later your first carrots will start to come, but they will be small 'baby' carrots. That's okay, harvest them and start to use them in salads. As you pull out the smaller carrots those left will have more room to grow and soon you will be harvesting bigger carrots along side your radishes.

To plant cucumbers, squash or pumpkins or other cucurbits such as gourds, you should make a depression in your garden patch about the size of a dinner plate. Plant seven or so seeds, pushing them about an inch deep down into the ground.

Cucurbits and other vine-growing plants can be trellised, if you wish. Trellising can have many benefits; a major benefit of it is that it saves space in your garden, meaning you can get more from the land that you use. Also, trellises can add a distinctive vertical element to the aesthetics of your yard.

Fences can also act as trellises, so planting your vines so they grow along your fence can help to add some privacy and beauty to the public face of your garden. Be design-conscious with trellising so you don't accidentally shade other plants requiring sun.

For diversity and beauty, plant okra and sunflowers around your garden. We are all familiar with the sunny beauty of sunflowers and their tasty seed, but okra, beautiful? Very few people are aware that okra plants grow a big beautiful flower. Different varieties of okra have different flowers and leaves, so do some research on the kind of flowers you are looking for. Remember you can plant all of these

varieties within the same garden patches if you want. Just make sure the taller plants will not shade others, and each plant has ample room to grow. Before you plant the seed, do some design work on the logistics and aesthetics of how your plants will grow together.

Now for the tomatoes. There are two types of tomatoes, determinate and indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes grow in bushes, while indeterminate types grow as sprawling vines. It is recommended the beginning gardener use determinate tomatoes as they are easier to work with. Before you plant your tomatoes, check your local frost date (or use 'Walls 'O Water' or frost caps to protect them from cool night temperatures until all danger of frost is over). (Plant the seedlings deep into the soil, burying most of the stem with just the top leaves exposed. The buried hairy stems will produce lush roots, giving you a much sturdier, healthy and hardy plant). More experienced gardeners can plant the indeterminate types, many of which are heirloom varieties. They will require staking or trellising to handle their lengthy stalks. Tip pruning can produce a lush and fuller plant once good growth is established.

For beans, there are two types to grow, bush bean and pole beans. You can grow either type, just keep your design considerations in mind while choosing them. (Pole beans look great on tripods on the part of your patch that receives the most sun.) It is recommended to plant your beans in a staggered planting schedule. Meaning, every three weeks or so, plant another batch of beans, then in three or so weeks, another and so on. This way your garden will continuously output beans. As with anything, you should put in some research into the varieties of beans before deciding to plant them.

(Plants such as chard, beets and lettuces can be planted in areas that will be partly shaded by other sun-loving plants. Pepper plants can also be put into a sunny place. Scatter marigold seeds in different areas of the garden to help deter insects. Herb plants can also be planted into the garden plots according to their sun requirements.)

NOW, your garden has everything planted and needs to be maintained. You are producing radishes and baby carrots while waiting for your beans, tomatoes, sunflowers, and other crops to come in. Of course, you have to water them. Ironically, people in the desert have a tendency to over-water their gardens. To check if your plants need watering, stick your finger into the dirt up to about the second knuckle. If you encounter any moisture, don't water. If it's dry, water. Simple. (A drip system takes the guess work out of hand watering by

using a simple battery timer set for how often the garden needs to be watered).

The key to success with plants is to keep the moisture and temperature of the roots consistent. Mulching and composting will help with this. So put compost and mulch on your plants liberally, don't be shy!

Remember that gardening is supposed to be a relaxing experience that helps build nutrition, beauty and community. *So don't stress, be relaxed.*

If you follow the tips and techniques presented here, your garden will have elements of a **permaculture system**—rain water harvesting, companion planting, composting. But this will not be a permaculture system. Permaculture, one of the foundations of sustainability and ecological design, is a complex, and intricately designed eco-system. It takes years of study to develop a working knowledge of permaculture, and to build up the organic resources to support a permaculture system. Creating this garden will be a good first step on the road to developing your own permaculture garden. Education is the key and we all need to learn if we, as a society, are to move into a sustainable future. An excellent book on the subject of permaculture gardening is called, " Introduction to Permaculture" by Bill Morrison.

Go out and get started on your best garden ever!!