

The Good Life

... growing your own produce...

With all this talk about food miles, GM foods, contaminated products, deceiving food labels, etc, one can get a bit dejected and confused when grocery shopping. For me, knowing that the produce I am growing, eating and feeding my family and friends is fresh and nutritional is not only a joy, but very satisfying. The quality and freshness of home grown produce combined with the peace of mind of knowing that it is chemical free has become an important issue to many people. The taste of truly fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs just picked before eating is second to none. In season fruit and veg simply taste better, picked close to home and eaten at their peak the flavour, texture and sweetness is at its absolute best.

The simple pleasure of growing your own healthy, organic produce also has the benefit of providing you exercise, fresh air and an awareness of our connection with nature. Whether that be a pot of salad greens on the back deck, a clump of rhubarb in the back corner or a full scaled vegetable potager, it all depends upon the usable space in your garden, your requirements and what time you have available to devote to its upkeep and maintenance.

There are many techniques or philosophies of produce garden ranging from organic gardening to biodynamic, permaculture, and companion planting with all these becoming increasingly relevant and popular with today's home gardener.

Most garden vegetables are planted on an annual basis depending upon the season, however, several plants including rhubarb, globe artichokes, strawberries and asparagus survive for many seasons, and along with fruit trees should be considered as permanent plantings.

Getting started ...

The following is an overview of the most important principals, however the beginner should consult further fact sheets available from any good nursery or garden reference book.

Soil - It's been said time and time again – 'healthy soil, healthy plant'. The soil forms the basis of any garden and provides oxygen, water and nutrients to the plant roots, necessary for their growth. A productive soil should have good structure, be well drained, and be rich in compost and manure.

The addition of organic manures and compost is fundamental to the success of vegetable gardens. Organic matter provides nutrients for plants as it is broken down by soil micro-organisms eventually forming part of the humus layer in the soil. This greatly improves soil structure leading to better drainage, oxygen availability, water retention and nutrient holding capacity. I don't need to outline again the benefits of adding compost to the soil and I'm sure everyone is now composting kitchen scraps along with green waste.

Sun - It is important that fruit and vegetables receive sufficient sunlight for their growth requirements. Vegetables grow quickly and need sunlight for photosynthesis to produce the energy needed for this growth. A northern aspect is ideal for a produce garden with beds running roughly in a north – south direction. At least 5 to 6 hours exposure to sunlight a day is recommended.

Water - Regular watering is also essential for successful fruit and vegetable crops. With the recent fabulous rains we have seen the best growth and lushness for years, however we must not become complacent. Most gardeners have installed rainwater tanks or a grey water system which re-uses laundry water.

Mulch - Mulches play an important role in the produce garden. A layer of pea straw or lucerne mulch will retain soil moisture, protect plant roots from summer heat, return organic matter to the soil, keep fruits off the soil surface and reduce the incidence of weed competition. Mulch needs to be topped up annually to ensure a good coverage.

Maintenance - Produce gardens do need their share of attention – having said that the rewards far out way the effort. Planting times will vary for different vegetables, herbs or fruits depending on their growing seasons. Generally speaking warm season vegetables are planted out in spring and cool season vegetables planted in autumn. Fruit trees, vines and shrubs, and some root crops are planted in winter and it's essential to plan ahead and ensure space is available throughout the year for different annual vegetables.

Pests and diseases are a natural part of the plant kingdom and it is not possible or desirable to totally eliminate them. Gardeners should aim to achieve a balance of pests and predators, in which pest numbers do not jeopardise crops,

but still provide a food source for the predators such as birds, spiders and predatory insects. Aim to have an organic garden where chemical sprays are not utilised as, not only are they harmful to many beneficial insects but they are very toxic to humans and pets. Only use sprays that are appropriate to the problem and if unsure ask for advice. Natural alternatives are available to deter pests including milk solutions and chilli, garlic and pyrethrum sprays.

Crop rotation also helps to maintain a healthy soil profile and minimises the transfer of disease from one crop to another. In general, root crops follow legumes and leaf crops, which are followed by the capsicums, eggplant and tomato. It is a good idea to periodically leave some areas fallow ie nothing planted or plant a green manure crop that is dug into the soil ie legumes rich in nitrogen.

Regular harvesting of vegetables, herbs and fruit, allows you to check the health of the plants as they grow and contributes to crop hygiene. In many cases the more you harvest the better the crops. Do not leave old fruit, vegetables and pruning material underneath the plants as these can harbour disease.

So with some sound techniques and a bit of effort you could be eating the tastiest fruit and vegetable this summer. Why not get your neighbours on board and share punnets or better still grow different things and trade. Visit farmers markets to see what's in season and ask questions and be sure to plant out some of the heirloom varieties which are often not available from supermarkets. Even the smallest space can be used to grow tasty vegies, herbs and even fruit, especially now with the expanding range of dwarf fruiting stock now available. Believe me, once you have tasted a home grown tomato you will find it very difficult to eat a supermarket one again !

Happy gardening & bon appetite ... Helen

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