

Grow More in Less Space

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Growing up, I remember we always had a very large vegetable garden in the backyard. Mom was a marvel in the garden. I don't remember a time when we didn't have fresh vegetables to eat all summer long.

Over the years, the popularity of growing one's own food has waxed and waned, but in recent times, the trend is once again to have edibles in the home landscape. However, not everyone has the room or time (or mobility) to keep a large garden. Small gardens are easier to manage and keeping your garden size small doesn't mean you have to forfeit a bountiful harvest.

There are several techniques that can help gardeners get maximum productivity from a small space. The first is to interplant. With this technique you alternate rows of fast and slow maturing vegetables. For example, plant a row of leaf lettuce between two rows of tomatoes or cabbage. The fast maturing crop, lettuce, is harvested first leaving the space available for the slower crop to mature.

A variation on this, sometimes called intercropping, is when you sow a slow and a fast maturing crop together in one area. Again, the fast maturing vegetables are harvested first leaving space for the slow maturing crop. An example of this is to plant radishes (fast maturing) and carrots (slow maturing) together.

Similar to intercropping is the technique of companion planting. Though the science of companion planting is often anecdotal, the practice dates back centuries and has been employed in gardens all over the world. It involves growing two or more crops together that benefit or complement each other. A good example of this is the Three Sisters Garden, a technique pioneered by Native Americans. In this garden, corn, pole beans and winter squash are planted together. The corn provides a structure for the climbing beans, the beans put nitrogen back into the soil, and the squash leaves serve as living mulch that conserves soil moisture and shades out weeds.

Succession planting is another technique to consider. As soon as one crop is finished plant another in the same plot or container. For example, after early, cool season crops such as radishes and peas are harvested, replant with beans, beets or cucumbers. After you are done harvesting the cucumbers in late summer, you could plant another round of radishes for a fall crop.

Succession planting is also used to describe staggered plantings of the same crop. For example, you can make successive plantings of beets every two to three weeks until midsummer for a continued harvest.

Then there is the practice of growing food vertically using trellises, cages, stakes or hanging baskets. This is an increasingly popular concept and truly does offer a way to grow food even with very limited space. Many vegetables and fruits grow very well vertically including pole beans, peas, cucumbers, squash, melons, tomatoes and strawberries. Buy small-fruited varieties for crops such as melons, cucumbers and squash. An added bonus of growing your food vertically is you can bring the plants up to eye-level, which makes harvesting much easier.

Lastly, if you lack land to cultivate don't despair. Many vegetables grow just fine in containers. All you need is a pot that provides good drainage and a sunny place to locate your vegetable garden. Most vegetables require a container that holds six to eight inches of potting soil though crops like tomatoes and other larger-sized plants will need deeper soil. Leaf lettuce, kale, chards, beets, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, radishes and cucumbers are just a few types of vegetables that I have grown in containers. For a list of popular vegetables that are well-suited for growing in containers, check out the new University of Wisconsin Garden Fact Sheet, *Vegetable Varieties for Containers*, at <https://pddc.wisc.edu/2020/04/20/vegetable-varieties-for-containers/>.

Happy Gardening!