

Companion Vegetable Planting

by Gail Hermenau

Your classic companion vegetable plantings are corn, beans and squash. Each plant provides some benefit to at least one of the other two. The corn contributes height; it provides a “living trellis” for the pole beans. In return, the pole beans are nitrogen fixing to the whole garden. The squash shades the ground beneath the corn and beans, thereby regulating the soil temperature, conserving soil moisture and acting as living mulch and suppressing weeds. One more benefit delivered by the squash vines is its ability to discourage mammal pests from entering your garden. Raccoons, for instance, love to pilfer corn, but dislike having to trudge through the squash vines because of their small, prickly spines.

Another way companion planting plays a role in pest control is the ability of certain plants to naturally repel certain pests. Other plants can help to prevent some disease problems. Yet other plants may lure pests away from a crop. This practice is used by organic gardeners, eliminating the need for chemicals in the garden. Planting a beneficial border makes use of plants that attract insect predators as well as pollinators. But, just using companion planting is not enough; you need to build up the diversity and richness of your garden soil. The natural companions in your garden soil, the microorganisms and earthworms, are part of the natural cycle that keeps the system thriving. In organic gardens, you try to recreate these natural cycles. Using companion planting is an important part of integrated pest management (IPM). It helps to bring a balanced eco-system to your garden, allowing nature to do its job. You can set up gardens that take advantage of the natural processes and create a successful and self sustaining system.

Companion planting based on nutrient needs is another way of using the companion planting system. You can plant vegetables that require the same nutrients, or you can plant vegetables that use nutrients efficiently. In late summer you can grow cabbage which needs a lot of nutrients at the same time you plant garlic. You can harvest the cabbage in the fall, and the garlic can grow till spring, getting a good crop from each.

Some definitions of setting up plant families

Botanical Families: These crops are genetically the same and often have the same cultural needs and pest problems—tomatoes, eggplant, peppers

Feeding Families: Crops that have the same nutrient needs. Some crops need highly fertile soil and others do fine in neutral or poor soil—onions, carrots, greens

Performance Families: These crops, when grouped together, help each other to grow better—strawberries, asparagus

Pest Fighting Families: One crop helps repel pests from the other—potatoes, beans

Crop Families: Cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower