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Good Life Gardening: Planning My Beds ~ Christina Pechloff

This year, I'm going to have my best garden yet! This is such an inspiring time of year for me. I love new beginnings. I think I must really have it bad—the gardening bug—because in the fall, as I'm still cleaning up the past summer's garden, I already get that familiar feeling of creative anxiety welling up in my belly. I start getting excited about planting and growing things in the summer sunshine again!

Visions of beautiful concentric circles of different coloured baby lettuces dance in my head. Tidy groupings of carrots and broccoli that grow big and wonderful with no wireworm or cabbage moth damage. All the weeds under control. Cabbages that look like giant flowers. Sunflowers standing tall and shining bright and sweet pea flowers that smell divine.

Crop rotation and companion planting are the first things I think about. When we grow our own food year after year, it's really important to rotate the crops. If we don't, we'll deplete the soil of important nutrient balances and encourage plant and soil diseases and pests that are attracted to the area if we've planted the same thing in the same place year after year.

A happy garden that's grown naturally without synthetic chemicals is a garden where plants that are good for each other are planted together and plants that aren't compatible are kept at a distance. So in my mind, crop rotation goes hand in hand with thoughtful companion planting.

Rotation

To garden with a crop rotation plan, we need to start with a basic understanding of the different plant families. This is a big topic and feels a little too much like biology class to me which really gets in the way of my more enjoyable and creative gardening thoughts so I'll just share how I try to keep it simple at my place.

In my garden, I focus on organizing my food crops into these groups:

1. cabbage family which includes broccoli and cauliflower, and the lovely brussels sprouts too,
2. allium family, garlic, onions, leeks and chives,
3. legume family which in my garden is beans and peas,
4. tomato family which includes potatoes, peppers and eggplant too,
5. carrot family, including dill, fennel, parsley and celery,

6. the squash family, cucumbers, melons and pumpkins too,
7. spinach, beets and chard,
8. lettuce and some other salad greens, and
9. corn stands alone.

The idea is that every year I plant each family in a different spot. After 4 years the families can return to the same bed they grew in 4 years ago. And around and around it goes.

Each fall, I like to draw a simple map of my garden which shows what grew where. Now, I can look at diagrams from the past three years and then get out my row markers that are labelled things like 'carrots' and 'green bush beans' and 'garlic'. I begin to place them in the new year's beds, making sure they don't go into the same bed as in the last three years. It's a bit like a puzzle and works surprisingly well for me.

While I'm deciding on the different plant families I'll grow and how I'll organize the rotation, I also figure out which plants will grow side-by-side and which ones I'll keep away from each other.

Companion Planting

Now this gets really fun. So many creative possibilities. Dream. Plan. Create. Herbs. Vegetables. Flowers.

There are some things I always grow together like cabbages and lemon gem marigolds. Not only do the marigolds discourage the cabbage moth from laying it's eggs on my cabbages, it makes my heart sing every time I look—the little yellow flowers peeking out from around the cabbages are just so beautiful.

One of the best known examples of efficient and beautiful companion planting is the 'Three Sisters' plant combination, originally a Native American approach to growing maize, beans and squash. This combination is now found in modern home gardens everywhere. I love planting 'Three Sisters' in my garden!

When I lived in the city I grew this combo in big half barrel containers. Last year in my Mayne Island garden, I grew my 'Three Sisters' in a round bed about six feet in diameter. I planted 16 sweet corn plants in the center, a whole bunch of bush bean seeds all around the corn plants (3 of these were pole beans so they could climb the corn to show off their lovely red flowers but didn't smother it) and six winter squash plants around the edge of the bed, mingling with the beans and

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circling the corn forest in the centre. This little garden produced a load of green beans for many of our summertime dinners, most of the corn plants produced two ears of sweet corn each (what a summertime delicacy!) and my squash plants yielded nine orange beauties for winter storage. All from a teeny-tiny piece of earth. One of my gardening successes!

Symbiotic relationship is the beauty of companion planting. Beans and other legumes have the miraculous ability to draw nitrogen from the air and bring it to the soil through their roots.

Since corn needs a lot of nitrogen to do well, it loves growing together with the beans that supply it. The corn in return, gives the beans something to hold onto and climb. Squash loves the nitrogen from the beans too. As the vines grow and spread over the ground, the squash serves as a living mulch, keeping the soil moist and keeping weeds from growing.

For some reading, the classic and well known companion planting guide *Carrots Love Tomatoes* by Louise Riotte is a nice place to start. ☺

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