

Improving Your Garden with Companion Planting By Nannette Chisholm

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As the blustery winds of March sweep through the Estes Valley, many of us can be found sipping tea and dreaming of summer, or at least the end of this unsettling pandemic. Within these daydreams, you may also be poring over seed catalogs and starting to conjure up new ideas for your garden this coming season.

One useful technique for organic gardening is something called Companion Planting. This idea is based on the premise that certain plants do better when planted near each other. We can keep our gardens free of pests, protected from sun and wind, use less fertilizer, and increase yields by pairing plants that provide shade, nutrients or shelter for each other.

The original success story with companion planting is the Native American practice of planting “The Three Sisters” of corn, beans and squash together. The tall corn stalks provided something for beans to climb on, while the squash would remain low, providing shade and discouraging weed growth. Beans helped supply nitrogen to the soil, which was needed by the corn and squash. Basically, companion planting is determining which plants naturally have a symbiotic relationship and doing our best to plant them together.

As you begin to sketch out your garden plot, take these companion plantings into consideration and try out a few new combinations this year. Talk with your gardening friends to see what has worked for them in the past. It’s fun to try out new combinations and see what works best.

Try planting bush beans next to radishes and spinach. The bush beans shade the spinach, and the radishes deter insects from damaging the spinach by attracting insects who will eat the radish leaves instead of destroying the spinach.

Try planting basil next to tomatoes - it is said this will even enhance the flavor of your tomatoes! It also helps repel pests such as aphids, asparagus beetles, and tomato horn worms. Basil also seems to like being next to oregano and peppers.

Beans are able to fix nitrogen in the soil, so they are very helpful if planted next to carrots, chard, cucumber, peas, potatoes, radish and strawberries. DON’T put beans next to chives, garlic, leeks and onion – they just don’t like each other! And don’t plant them next to your beets—they tend to stunt each other’s growth. (Beets do like to be next to garlic, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, mint and potatoes).

Cilantro repels aphids, potato beetles, and spider mites, so put in bunches of this delicious herb all around your garden for pest control.

Marjoram grows well next to just about everything and is believed to stimulate the growth of plants around it. Marjoram really loves being next to asparagus. Bees and other pollinators love marjoram, so it is helpful to have it near plants that need pollinating like cucumbers and squash.

These are just a few combinations, and with a little research you can easily discover more. Stay safe, warm, and dream a great garden into being for 2020!

Nannette Chisholm has lived in Estes Park for the past 20 years. She earned her Master of Science Degree in Sustainable Systems Design in 1991, and has a love for gardening, hiking and being immersed in the natural world. She has been a gardener with EVCG for three years. She thanks Carly Fraser and her website, LiveLoveFruit, for her expertise on companion planting.