Components of intensive gardens

A few weeks ago, I touched on intensive gardening. This week I’m going to go a little more in depth on that topic.

As a reminder, the purpose of intensive gardening is to get as much produce possible from a given amount of space. Back in the 1950s, a typical family garden covered a large area and featured wide paths between narrow rows of plants. Not only did the plants need care, but the paths were a constant source of work and in need of weeding. And typically, all the crops were ready for harvest at the same time.

Intensive gardening helps take care of those issues … and more.

Soil preparation is the key to successful gardening of any kind, but especially intensive gardening. Because the plants are grown so close together, they must have enough nutrients and water. Although gardeners obviously can provide extra fertilizer and irrigation, nothing can substitute for deep, fertile soil that’s rich in organic matter.

Humus-rich soils hold extra nutrients. Existing elements are released by the actions of earthworms, microorganisms and acids in the soil, slowly releasing nutrients for plant use. Remove Bermudagrass/weeds in the bed or choke out unwanted growth using newspaper or cardboard underneath the soil.

A raised bed is one component of intensive gardening. Having a system of beds allows gardeners to concentrate soil preparation effort in small areas, which makes soil amendments more effective and creates the best environment for vegetable growth.

Gardening in raised beds helps break work into units. Instead of being overwhelmed with weeding one large garden, the task is broken down into the number of beds. Other gardening tasks are accomplished with the same ease. Raised beds also are great for those with limited mobility since they won’t have to garden at ground level.

Vertical gardening is another component of intensive gardening and consists of supporting plants on trellises, nets, strings, cages or poles. Although the yield per plant may be less, vertical gardening takes up a lot less space than traditional gardening. Just make sure the soil is deep and well drained to allow roots to extend vertically and avoid competition with other plants. Great choices for vertical gardening include cucumbers, melons, pole beans and tomatoes. Some plants, like gourds, entwine themselves onto the support system. Melons and tomatoes must be
tied to the support. Keep in mind vertically grown plants are more exposed to sun and wind, so they dry out faster, which in turn requires more frequent watering.

For a new twist, try inter-planting, which is growing two or more types of vegetables in the same place at the same time. However, it takes careful planning. Gardeners must consider light, water and nutrient requirements for each variety planted. Consider the length of the plant’s period and pattern. Is it tall, short, underground or aboveground? Inter-plant by alternating rows within a bed, such as planting a row of peppers next to a row of onions, by mixing plants within a row, or by distributing various species throughout the bed.

Succession planting is a great way to make the most of an intensive garden. To do this method, plant something new in the spots vacated by what you just harvested.

Relay planting consists of planting a new crop before the old one is harvested. This method requires some thought as crops planted very early are likely to get a slower start due to low soil and air temperatures.

Module vegetable gardening refers to developing small spaces with soil amendments so plants, especially vegetables, can be grown close together and harvested on a staggered timetable. This is a great way to increase the potential yield from a small area. A good example of modular gardening is the popular Square Foot Gardening technique.

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