



COMPANION PLANTING

A simple definition of companion planting refers to grouping plants with similar physical characteristics or needs together. A deeper approach involves fostering natural symbiotic relationships that provide benefits like shading, shelter, support, soil enrichment and pest trapping or repellent. Successful companion planting naturally increases biodiversity, improves the soil and protects against pests and diseases. Putting the “right” plants together and keeping the “wrong” ones apart can be tricky at first, but you’ll quickly learn what works for your own garden.

SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS COME IN MANY FORMS

- **Physical support** - “Stacking” plants takes advantage of vertical space. Combining multiple crops of varying heights and habits is the most efficient use of a small area, thereby increasing your yields. The “three sisters” - corn, beans, and squash - are a perfect example. Tall corn stalks act as a trellis for pole beans, while the squash groundcover retains soil moisture and suppresses weeds.
- **Shelter** - Trees and shrubs serve as great windbreaks as long as they’re not blocking sunlight, and tall, sun-loving crops provide shade for low-light crops. Cool season greens can grow throughout the summer if provided with afternoon shade.
- **Soil fertility and structure** - Nitrogen-fixing legumes such as beans, peas, clover and alfalfa have a special bacterium that pull nitrogen out of the air and turn it into a form plants can use. While these plants release very little of that nitrogen into the soil when actively growing, they become a long-lasting supply if tilled under or left to decompose. Try planting a cover crop of snow peas or clover in the fall or spring, and you’ll be greatly rewarded for years to come. Taproot crops (like carrots and parsley) can also be useful in breaking up hard, clay soils for their fibrous-rooted partners.

- **Pest & disease control**

Repellent - Some plants exude chemicals from their roots, leaves or flowers that repel certain pests or soil pathogens, protecting themselves as well as neighboring plants (lavender, chives, oregano and thyme). Use these as a border around desirable crops.

Camouflage - Insects identify food sources by smell and appearance. Heavily-scented species like dill, chives, parsley, catnip, mint, basil and marigold all make desirable crops harder to locate; while interplanting differing forms and shapes confuses would-be pests.

Trap crop - Certain plants are more attractive to pests, so you can place these in clumps near the crops you’re trying to protect as a lure. You can pull the trap crop once it’s become heavily-infested.

Attractant for beneficial bugs - Beneficial insects like lady beetles, praying mantis and parasitic wasps reduce pest pressure by consuming or parasitizing their prey. Attract them by planting fennel, parsley, carrots, cosmos, sweet alyssum, tansy and chamomile in and around the garden.

