

Companion Planting: Working With Nature in Your Garden (published 2026-04-11)
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What does companion planting mean to you? For some, companion planting means attracting pollinators. For others, it a way to maintain an organic environment, replenish soil nutrients, or even improve the flavor and beauty of the harvest. Gardening becomes much easier when you work with nature instead of against it.

All of these are good reasons to explore companion planting. The goal is to attract beneficial insects, confuse pests, and support crops before problems begin. While many books, charts, and lists are available, Master Gardeners recommend using trusted research-based resources—especially those with *.edu*, *.gov*, or *.org* extensions.

According to a University of Tennessee Extension publication, *You Can Control Garden Insects*, some commonly suggested plantings include beans with rosemary to deter Mexican bean beetles; tomatoes with basil to repel hornworms; eggplant with catnip to reduce flea beetles; cucumbers with radish or nasturtiums for cucumber beetles; and cabbage with thyme to discourage cabbageworms. However, the publication also notes that while these combinations are widely recommended, the last 4 examples have mixed research results on their effectiveness.

Before getting started, consider keeping a garden journal. This can be as simple as a notebook where you record what you plant and which companion plants you use. Over time, this record becomes a valuable tool for tracking results and improving your garden year after year.

When planning your garden, choose plants that complement each other structurally, help repel insects, and support soil health. Don't be afraid of a slightly "unruly" garden. Mixing flowers, herbs, and vegetables can help suppress weeds and create a more resilient growing space. A classic example is the "Three Sisters" method, traditionally used by Indigenous peoples. Corn provides support for pole beans, beans add nitrogen to the soil, and squash spreads along the ground, helping deter pests. This concept can be adapted for modern gardens. For example, planting okra with purple hull peas and squash or sweet potatoes offers a similar balance of support, soil improvement, and ground cover.

Trap cropping is another useful technique. Insects often prefer certain plants but will settle for others if necessary. By planting a crop that attracts pests away from your main vegetables, you can reduce damage. For instance, planting Blue Hubbard squash early can draw squash bugs and cucumber beetles away from your primary squash crop.

Leguminous plants such as peas, beans, and clover contribute to nitrogen fixation. While most of this nitrogen is used by the plant itself, some may become available in the soil to benefit neighboring plants.

Companion planting can also provide biochemical pest suppression. Marigolds are a popular example, as they release compounds that help repel certain nematodes.

Clever use of space also plays a role in companion planting. Through spatial interaction and “nurse cropping,” taller plants can provide shade for cool season crops like lettuce and beets. This also allows for succession planting and can increase overall productivity.

For more information—including a plant compatibility chart and additional strategies—refer to resources from Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Resources

“Garden Journal,” <https://www.netmga.net/ask-a-master-gardener/gardening-general-info/>

“You Can Control Garden Insects,” <https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2024/01/PB595.pdf>

“Companion Planting in Gardening,” https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/spes/spes-620/SPES-620.pdf

“Companion Planting in Home Gardens,” <https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/companion-planting-home-gardens>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.