

Intensive Gardening

By Susan Camp

We haven't planted vegetables, except for a few tomatoes, peppers, and okra plants, since we have lived in Gloucester. We don't have enough sun near the house and deer and other critters eat the daylilies planted in the field. Now, we are removing the daylilies and will finally have room for vegetable beds. We will use the rich, healthy soil from the daylily garden in raised beds and try our hands at intensive gardening. The vegetables will get sufficient sun and there is a water source. We will surround the beds with a fence to deter the deer.

As food prices at the supermarket have risen and produce quality has decreased, intensive gardening has increased in popularity. Space to plant a vegetable garden is limited for many people, especially those living in urban and suburban communities. While garden space is less of a problem in rural communities like Gloucester, intensive gardening is attractive to gardeners who want an alternative to the traditional, long, single rows of vegetables.

The goal of intensive gardening is to grow as much produce as possible in a compact area. Raised beds that are 3 to 4 feet wide and 6 to 12 inches above the ground provide the ideal space, allowing the gardener to work at a comfortable height without stooping or walking long distances to weed or harvest crops. In addition, the soil is not compacted by the gardener's feet. Since the beds are filled with prepared soil and compost, drainage is not a problem. You can purchase raised beds or grow boxes, or you can build your own from instructions in books or online. YouTube videos on raised bed construction are helpful.

As with any garden preparation, planning is essential. The ideal location for an intensive garden is an area that receives at least 6 hours of full sunlight each day and has a convenient water source. Vegetables planted closely together will compete for water during the summer months, so you will need to provide one inch of water beyond normal rainfall each week.

Careful soil preparation will insure successful harvests, so the first step is always a soil test through VA Tech. Test results will provide information on soil pH and needed elements like phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca), magnesium (Mg), and necessary micronutrients. Nitrogen (N) needs will depend on the crops you plant. A soil test for organic matter also can be done.

Fall is the ideal time to prepare the beds. Till the soil 8 to 12 inches deep, and your beds will be ready for planting in the spring. If you are planting a vegetable you haven't grown before, research the proper time to plant. "Home Gardening in Gloucester", available through the Gloucester Master Gardeners, provides valuable information on planting times and intensive gardening techniques, which include succession planting, interplanting, and vertical planting.

In succession planting, new vegetables are planted as soon as the previous ones are picked, so fresh vegetables are harvested every season.

Interplanting involves growing two or more types of vegetables in the same bed at the same time. Nutrient and water needs of both plants; possible allelopathic or negative effects of certain plants on others; and mature plant height and spread must be considered.

Vertical gardening is an intensive technique that works for sprawling plants like cucumber or vining plants like pole beans. Vertically grown plants require less space, but need more water and may cast shade on low-growing plants.

Spacing involves positioning plants so that centers are equidistant from each other, resulting in staggered rows that maximize space and provide less room for weeds to sprout.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-335 “Intensive Gardening Methods” and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension publication “Intensive Vegetable Gardening” provide detailed information on intensive gardening. Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service publication HO-124W “Small Plot and Intensive Gardening” offers information on other intensive techniques, including band planting, short row planting, and mini gardening.

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