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# Intensive Backyard Farming

By Becky Wells, Gardener, Designer and Consultant

## A Little History

Intensive Backyard Farming is an old and practical idea. During WW-II, French people started growing crops in their backyards to fill in gaps when farmers were drafted. Thus, the French re-invented backyard farming by growing much of their produce in small spaces. Using composted manure, organic amendments, rain barrels and old farming methods not dependent on machines, the French created local produce for their communities. With this community feeling, they helped each other in their backyard gardens and created successful local farmers markets.

Like an aging star, intensive backyard farming is making its comeback in a strong way. Last year, Michelle Obama created an organic garden at the White House. In our own area, a Graton resident, Joan Saxe has begun her own intensive backyard farm. Joan is passionate about growing good, nutritious food and being limited to a small backyard plot did not stop her. She began her garden last fall and has added more trees and vegetables recently. A strong belief in sustainability, along with debilitating physical issues, gave Joan the determination to grow intensively. She planned her 900 sq ft plot effectively. This year she will harvest organic produce in an easy, convenient way.

## Why Grow Your Own Produce

There are many reasons to grow produce in your backyard and Joan has much to say on the subject:

"I wish I had more time to think about all this, but there always seems to be so much to do. What I just said is, in fact, one of the reasons that intensive farming appeals to me. I wish I could be a full-time farmer, but I can't, and this probably applies to a lot of people. So the more compact and efficient the planted area is, the easier it will be to maintain. This is also important for me because of my energy limitations. Each motion I make is always weighed to see if it is necessary or if there is some better way to use my energy allotment for that day...

"I have always had an affinity for trees. I have no idea why or where that came from but I do. I would turn that whole back field (the empty lot behind her trailer) into an orchard if I could.

"I remember when I was a very young girl, hearing my Mother planning some additions to our garden in San Francisco and she mentioned a "mock" Orange and a decorative Japanese Cherry as two possibilities. I recall wondering then, why would anyone waste space on "fake" trees when you could get a real Orange tree and a real Cherry tree? This was never explained to me but now, many years later, there are so many more reasons for almost everyone to plant something where they live.

"Our food supply is uncertain in its safety and it is definitely deficient in the vitamins and minerals we need to maintain optimum health. We continue to hear of the failure of large food corporations failing (omit) to disclose vital information to the public, such as E Coli, or, most recently, the Whole Foods revelation that their organic frozen foods came from China where there is no oversight at all! This is one more area in which we need to take back the control of our food supply.... Planting a small garden and reducing one's dependence on commercial produce

is just one way to do that. And it tastes so much better!...I'm off to buy some seed potatoes."

## Here are more reasons to grow your own food:

1. Homegrown tastes better. As Julia Child put it "... just good food from fresh ingredients." It really does "make" the dish.
2. You know what is in your food, where it comes from, and who touched it.
3. Homegrown costs less from your pocketbook.
4. Backyard farms make a lighter carbon footprint.
5. You can have more variety in your fruit and vegetables.
6. You have the ability to guarantee that nutrients will be provided
7. You can build a community with farming in your own backyard.

## Intensive Backyard Garden and Resources

An article in *Mother Earth News* (May/June 1975) called "Companion Planting" is an oldie but goodie in explaining the "hows" of intensive farming:

"The way in which the growing space is used is at least as important to successful "method" gardening as is the preparation of the soil. Vegetable types are grouped together—in single beds or... in groups of adjoining beds— according to compatibility.

"Intensive gardeners believe that different plants — especially when grown in close proximity—affect each other in a number of ways. The vegetables must, for example, be placed with a regard for simple physical compatibility ... that is, a slow-growing variety shouldn't be planted where it will soon be overshadowed by a rapidly maturing plant.

"But companion planting goes far beyond such commonsense dictums. Certain vegetables, flowers, and herbs...are mutually beneficial when grown together ... helping eliminate each other's insect pests, and ever, influencing the quality of each other's products! (Potatoes, as an example, can—when planted near beans—be very helpful in controlling the Mexican bean beetle ... while Bibb lettuce will taste better if it's grown in companionship with spinach!)... (See a related article, *Companion Planting*.)"

Succession planting is also used. It is a kind of "companion planting in time, or a small-scale, intensive form of crop rotation. This practice, of course, allows the grower's plot to yield the greatest possible amount of produce," the *Mother Earth* article adds. "More important, however, is the fact that succession planting—as practiced by biodynamic/French intensive gardeners—alternates plants that are "heavy feeders" (those that take large amounts of nutrient from the soil) with varieties that are "heavy givers" ... and thus the productive technique also helps the gardener return more nutrition to the soil than he or she has taken out!"

Another resource for backyard farming can be found in *The Sustainable Vegetable Garden: A Backyard Guide to Healthy Soil and Higher Yields* by John Jeavons. It shows how easy it is to grow fantastic healthy organic produce, while saving resources and improving the soil. The book has step-by-step illustrations and instructions that make techniques simple for even the beginning gardener.

Also, *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Organic Garden* answers many questions regarding design, soil types, produce varieties, and etc. **Happy Gardening!**

Joan Saxe's plant selection list is on the web site version of this article