

Time for Projects!

To learn something new can occasionally require a lot of effort but sometimes it just drops into your head effortlessly! The recent program at Gloucester Library sponsored by the Gloucester Master Gardeners featured Mathews Master Gardener Marguerite DeVita and introduced us to 'Square Foot Gardening'. It was educational, amazing, and fun!

Square foot gardening is one of those ideas that promises so much saving of time, money, work, water, et al that our inner skeptic stirs and mumbles. The video shown that evening was convincing – and even more convincing was Maggie Devita's hands-on experience. As she assured the audience, if she, given her senior status, can do the necessary construction, anyone can. Once the boxes are constructed, the only tools needed are a pencil, a trowel, and scissors!

The 'textbook' "Introduction to Square Foot Gardening" has recently been reissued in a streamlined paperback edition and the author, Mel Bartholomew, stands by his assertion that the savings in space and work are a stunning 80%. By constructing above ground boxes such as 2x4, 4x6 etc and strictly marking them off in one square foot plots you can grow a tremendous number of healthy plants in a small space with the advantage of having a new space instantly ready when an earlier crop is harvested. Long or short, the width of the boxes should not exceed four feet, making it easy to reach the center.

The raised bed assures good drainage; the plot is small enough to shield from prowling rabbits; good soil makes extra fertilizing unnecessary; the small amount of water needed stays with the plant so you are not watering weeds. Good soil is essential and the recommended mix is 1/3 garden vermiculite, 1/3 sphagnum peat moss, and 1/3 compost (either homemade or purchased). The peat moss is controversial because of the ages it takes to 'grow' it: many gardeners are using coir as a substitute. However, Canada has nearly endless acres of peat and is limiting its removal, possibly making its use less environmentally problematical.

One of the experimental projects Maggie Devita is currently involved in is grafting tomato plants. She is raising both the 'root' tomato and its scion and she suggested growing the two complementary parts until the stems were at least ¼ inch thick to facilitate grafting.

That would be when the plants were 5" to 6" tall and would have 4 or 5 fully open leaves. Maggie had grow lights, a great Maggie-made set-up, and sturdy seedlings. She had kept the seedlings close to the lights avoiding any chance of weak spindly plants. Naturally one must keep an eye on the project, not letting the leaves touch the lights.

Grafting tomatoes has been done for years as a method of enjoying the hybrid strength and disease resistance of one species and the taste of the heirloom kinds. However, even gardeners accustomed to grafting trees and shrubs were leery of using the technique on herbaceous plants, afraid the graft would collapse. Maggie reported having obtained different kinds of clamps to see which held the stems together most securely.

One easy method is using a flexible silicon clip-on tube. The tube is slit so it will fall off when the joined stem expands sufficiently. The Johnny's Selected Seeds has the tubes as well as 'maxifort' root stock. The Territorial Seed Co. website has information on grafting as well as selling the already grafted plants. They are slightly more expensive than regular ones but trying differently treated plants of the same cultivar would be an interesting study in contrasts?

Giant gourds were grafted in China hundreds of years ago, so this is not space-age thinking but today the practice is being extended to melons, cucumbers, eggplants, and peppers, especially in fields prone to fungal diseases. According to a report in the gardening newsletter, 'The Avant Gardener' tests conducted by the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in Wooster, Ohio, showed that the grafted tomatoes out-yielded non-grafted plants by as much as 30% in both field and high tunnel production.