

## Bloom Companions

By Susan Camp

My husband built a new raised bed for herbs last week. It is 7 feet by 3 feet by 22 inches high. He put it in a great spot just outside the kitchen door. The bed has a rat wire bottom and weed barrier cloth inside. I can hardly wait to fill it with soil and compost and start planting some herbs. I am growing cilantro, dill, two varieties of basil, and two of parsley from seed. I have some marjoram, sage, and thyme to transplant and I will buy some more varieties over the next few weeks.

Last year I grew a few herbs in a grow box because we were so involved with redoing our front garden that I didn't have time to think beyond basic kitchen herbs. Now that the garden is well underway, I can turn my attention back to herbs, which are really what I enjoy growing the most.

Even though I have raised herbs for at least 35 years, I have never paid attention to books and articles that talk about companion planting. I found few scientific articles related to the concept on extension websites, although Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication ENTO 55NP "Improving Pest Management with Farmscaping" provided recommendations for flowering plants that will attract beneficial insects, such as pollinators, and natural enemies of insect pests to plant next to farm crops. Numerous gardening authors anecdotally report that placing certain plants next to each other either is helpful or harmful in some way to one or both of the plants.

Reported positive effects of companion planting include soil improvement; promotion of healthy growth; enhancement of flavors of herbs and vegetables; attraction of healthy insects (bees, butterflies, ladybugs, and parasitic wasps); and deterrence of insect pests. I decided that the topic was worth examining.

The basic concept of companion planting is that biodiversity—planting many different varieties—is better than a monoculture, an idea I mentioned in last week's column about peat harvesting. I chose to explore several online articles that discuss which popular herbs can be planted together and the positive and negative effects they might have on each other.

Basil, sometimes called "the king of herbs" is said to improve the flavor of most herbs planted close by and to repel flies and mosquitoes. Basil should never be planted near sage or common rue. Rue repels Japanese beetles. Rosemary planted near basil likely will die, but grows well with sage. Rosemary and sage will deter bean beetles, cabbage moths, and carrot flies.

Garlic repels Japanese beetles, aphids, snails, and vampires, in case you are concerned with the bats flying around your house on summer nights. Chives repel aphids, as do members of the mint family, which also repel ants and mosquitoes. Mint species may take on one another's flavor if they are planted too closely together and should be planted in containers to keep them from

invading the rest of the garden. Mints, lavender, catnip, and catmint all attract bees and butterflies.

Chamomile, marjoram, and tarragon improve the flavor of any neighboring herb. Tarragon may enhance the growth of all nearby herbs. Coriander/cilantro deters potato beetles, aphids, and spider mites. Coriander tea is said to be effective against severe infestation by spider mites.

Dill and fennel should not be planted together because they can cross-pollinate. Dill actually attracts tomato hornworms, and both herbs, as well as parsley, often are decimated by black swallowtail caterpillars. Plant plenty of dill, fennel, and parsley to share with them! Just remember that fennel doesn't get along with any other herb. Its affects are allelopathic to many garden plants and may kill them.

Since I haven't found a lot of scientific evidence to back up the claims of companion planting, I would like to hear about different experiences other gardeners have had with their herb gardens. Just in case, my fennel will stand alone.

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