

A FAREWELL TO MEL

Written By

Sue Pezzola

Extension Educator

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Albany County

It was a shock to learn of Mel Bartholomew's death in late April of this year. I felt as though a friend had died, a friend of many years with whom much had been shared. I had never met Mel, but through his book a friendship had emerged and I suspect that many gardeners would say something similar. As an Extension Educator I am in awe of what Mel conceived and accomplished through his now famous concept of square foot gardening. He created a simple method to space plants on a 12" grid system that gave order to a garden and taught gardeners to grow intensively and to be more successful. His book on this square foot gardening technique published by Rodale Press in 1981, revolutionized the backyard gardening world.

Mel was born in Kingston, NY on December 14, 1931. His family moved soon after to California where his mother, an avid gardener, would garden all year. Mel was an engineer by trade and a gardener by inclination but it was his own frustrations that made him look at the conventional gardening wisdoms and come up with something that made more sense to him. Mel thought that the typical backyard garden had too much wasted space that allowed too many weeds and unnecessary labor. It was a system based on farming practices that allowed for rows and spaces to let in animals to help with the plowing. His square foot grid system combined geometry and raised bed gardening and eliminated the extra space conserving the gardener's energy. It employed basic principles of building soil and maintaining its health by adding compost and organic matter. The grid system is intersected by narrow walking paths that allows the gardener easy access to the growing spaces. Mel's practical approach to gardening takes 20 percent of the space of a conventional garden and it uses about 10 percent of the water. These qualities are especially important as we acclimate to a changing climate.

Retiring from engineering at the relatively early age of 42, Mel would spend the next 42 years helping the backyard gardener. Eventually he brought his square foot gardening techniques to the world with the Square Foot Gardening Foundation to ensure that people everywhere could grow some of their own food simply and economically.

While Mel was a successful businessman and engineer, his legacy lies in the garden, specifically a square foot garden. His blend of science and practicality have stood the test of time to become part of the gardening vernacular. Not too shabby for a kid from upstate New York.

Sources:

"Mel Bartholomew, an Engineer Who Popularized Square Foot Gardening, Dies at 84." New York Times, May 8, 2016, Sam Roberts, <http://www.nytimes.com/>

Squarefootgardening.org

Source: *Root Concerns*, an E-mail Gardening Newsletter from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer, Albany and Schenectady Counties, June, 2016, Volume 11, Number 5.