

Intensive Planting Guidebook

Gardenary



Nicole Burke

INTENSIVE
PLANTING



IT'S TIME TO MEET

Your Garden Coach



Nicole Burke



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and LEAVES, ROOTS & FRUIT**

I am the owner and founder of Gardenary Co., an online kitchen gardening education and resource company. I'm so excited to share with you how I break all the plant spacing rules to maximize production in my raised-bed kitchen garden.

In this ebook, I'll walk you step by step through the process of planting a wide variety of edible plants in your garden space so that you always have something to harvest, whether that's your favorite herb leaves or bowlfuls of shiny red fruits.

Guidebook Outline

01

Pros & Cons
of Intensive
Planting

02

The Plate
Planting
Method

03

How to Plant
& Tend Your
Garden

04

Plants That
Should NOT
Be Intensively
Planted



I've been a rule-follower all my life.

I used to follow all the rules and advice on the plant tags as if they were **The Law**. As a beginner gardener, I really couldn't have been more obedient, spacing my first tomato plants exactly three feet apart in two zig-zagged rows, even though that meant I could only fit four plants in my little garden box.

And that was all I had growing.

It didn't take long for me to regret following the rules.

First of all, I got very little production out of my garden. I waited months to fill my harvest basket with the fruits of my labor, but all I got were a handful of tomatoes after losing most of my crop to the squirrels.

I also soon learned that the empty space between each tomato plant was poor design. All that bare soil left exposed to the elements dried out quickly, which meant I was constantly watering, sometimes twice a day in the hot summer months. Lugging a heavy hose around my backyard when I had so many other things I needed to do was *not* how I had pictured my first foray into gardening.

That bare soil was also an open house for weeds. Nature, as you know, has a way of filling empty spaces, and weeds were soon popping up between my tomato plants, where they enjoyed unimpeded access to sunlight, water, and other resources. After just a couple of weeks, there were plenty of plants growing in my garden, but most of them had not been planted by me and were not things I wanted to eat. Meanwhile, there were so many things I wanted to grow in the garden, but I only had this little space.

After several seasons of growing sad, solitary tomato plants amid dozens of weeds, I had a realization: If bare soil is hard to manage and smaller plants want to grow in those empty areas, why not just plant smaller plants **actually want to eat** in that space?

These plants would protect the soil so I wouldn't have to water as often, prevent weeds from growing to fill the void, and most importantly, give me leaves I could harvest while I was waiting and waiting for my tomato plants to produce. That way, when squirrels stole all my fruits or something else happened to my tomatoes, I wasn't riddled with disappointment because I'd banked my entire growing season's success on four tomato plants. I'd still have things to put in my harvest basket, even if those things weren't shiny red fruits.

So, I started planting smaller plants around those tomatoes, and guess what? It worked! Not perfectly, but better than following the plant tag suggestions ever had. In fact, it worked so well that I started planting this way with all of my **Rooted Garden** clients once I started my garden consulting business.

That's right. I am a certified rule breaker now, and if you're feeling daring, you can toss those plant spacing guidelines out the window too. After all, they're not actually the law. They're merely suggestions.



THROUGHOUT THIS EBOOK, YOU'LL LEARN:

- the pros and cons of intensive planting;
- tips and tricks to make intensive planting work for you, wherever you're growing;
- which plants should not be planted using this method;
- and our Plate Planting Method that'll transform the way you plan your garden season after season.

Just to clarify, **“intensive planting”** is not a term that I came up with. It had already been around for a long time before I ever picked up my first dibber. The way we go about intensive planting at Gardenary, however, is unique.

Let's get **intense** about our plant spacing.



What Is Intensive Planting?

Intensive planting is a way of packing in the plants in your garden. It's basically ignoring the plant spacing suggestions on plant tags, and people can become pretty opinionated and even mad about this when they see my garden or a client's garden on social media.

I know this because I receive hundreds of messages from gardeners who want to turn me into the **plant spacing police** or something. "Wait a second! You're breaking the rules! I'm telling on you!"

Here's an excerpt from just one of the emails I've received:

Dear Nicole, It appears that you're absolutely breaking ALL of the plant tag rules when you set up your kitchen garden. Your plants are packed so close together, I can't imagine that you're not having serious pests issues and that your plants are producing the way you want them to. Please explain.

I know, I know. I'm not planting the way I'm **"supposed to"**. But this is one of those times that I'm breaking the rules and not feeling guilty about it.

This excerpt from my first book, *Kitchen Garden Revival*, explains why:

I'm going to come right out and say it: You can pretty much ignore the plant labels.

Because guess what? The plant tags in nurseries weren't created for kitchen gardeners. The plant tags tell you how far apart your plants should be if you're growing crops in long and wide rows on a farm or a large in-ground vegetable patch, not in your backyard's raised garden. So, when the tag says something like "space 3 to 4 feet apart (0.9 to 1.2 m) in 3-foot (0.9 m) rows," it's talking to the farmer who will have 40 or 60 feet (12.2 or 18.3 m) of each planting row with twenty or forty or more plants along the hill. Is this you? This isn't me. And this is not a kitchen garden.

Don't get me wrong. I'm so thankful we have farmers who farm in rows and plant lots and lots of food. We need more of them. This is, in no way, meant as disrespect to the farmers who plant in rows. Farmers: If any of you are reading this, please keep planting all the delicious things however you want to and I will buy them all. And please don't hate me for breaking the plant spacing rules.

You too can commit to breaking the plant spacing rules by taking the **Intensive Planting Pledge**. Oh yes, dear reader, there's a pledge and everything.

But before you take it, I do want to say that intensive planting is not for everybody. Make sure you and your garden space meet these requirements.

INTENSIVE PLANTING IS FOR RAISED GARDEN BEDS

Intensive planting does not work for in-ground gardens. It only works when you're growing in a raised bed that's filled with nutrient-rich soil and using strong trellises for plant support. The reason we can pack in the plants is because the raised garden bed provides room for roots to dig down deep, while the trellises help plants grow up and stretch out.

That is to say, you should continue following the plant spacing rules if you're planting and growing in the ground. (That'll make the plant spacing police happy!)

If you're considering intensive planting but you haven't watched **Kitchen Garden Academy** or read *Kitchen Garden Revival*, I highly recommend you pick your preferred learning method and discover more about kitchen garden setup first.



INTENSIVE PLANTING IS FOR PEOPLE WHO TEND THEIR GARDENS REGULARLY

Intensive planting does not work for people who don't have the time or intention to tend their gardens regularly. You can't pack in your plants and then forget them for a month. You have to be ready to plant, water, fertilize, prune, and harvest a little bit every couple of days.



All right, if you've got the right setup and the right intentions, you can go ahead and ignore those **plant tags**. I'll walk you through how you can add plants to your garden even when you already have plants growing in the space, some of which have been growing there for several months already, and how you can repeat this every single week during the growing period.

If you're ready to learn about the challenges, the possibilities, and all the in-between steps to intensive planting, then grab your trowel, get your garden gloves ready, and let's dig in!

01

Pros & Cons of Intensive Planting

Clearly, I am all for intensive planting, and you probably already caught a couple of reasons why this planting method works best for me and my garden space. Let's explore each and every pro in a bit more detail now.

THE PROS OF INTENSIVE PLANTING

PRO NUMBER ONE

The first major advantage is that you have less bare soil. We learned during the Dust Bowl and many other environmental challenges just how bad exposed soil can be on a larger level.

In the garden, bare soil is a no-no because it dries out faster, it loses nutrients faster, and it leaves space for weeds. Plants growing in exposed soil are, unsurprisingly, more likely to be stressed. If you feel like you're always having to water your garden because your soil is drying out too fast, that could be because your plants have too much space between them. There's just too much exposed soil, and the water in that soil is evaporating much faster than it would if it had plants growing in it.

To combat these issues in raised beds, gardeners often turn to mulching, but I've found that mulch just gives garden pests a place to hide. Plus, it can actually burn your plants, all while costing you more and providing nothing that you can eat in return.

What we want is for our soil to be covered, but not by mulch. By plant mass. Intensive planting is like a living blanket for the soil; it protects it and helps the soil hold all of its nutrients and water.

Intensive planting all but gets rid of the bare soil problem, which is one of its biggest advantages. I water my garden much less than people who space their plants far apart.

If a weed does grow in my raised beds, I take that as a sign that I need to plant something I want to grow there. Nature wants something to grow in that spot, so why not add a plant that you'd enjoy harvesting from and eating, or a plant that you'd enjoy looking at, like a flower?



PRO NUMBER TWO

The second advantage is the wider variety of plants you can fit into your garden with intensive planting.

Picture just one type of plant in a raised bed all by itself (like my sad little tomatoes from the introduction). That's actually a repeat of a major problem in our current farming industry: monocropping. Some gardeners are so focused on following the plant spacing rules that they fail to add diversity in the form of other plants to their space. Having just one type of plant means lots of open space and increases the likelihood of pests thoroughly attacking each and every one of those plants because there's literally nothing to interrupt them or stop them from moving from plant to plant.

Following the spacing rules often means you get nothing to show for it. I learned my lesson with those tomatoes, and when I set up my next garden, I realized there were so many things I wanted to grow there. Two problems: There are only 60 to 90 days in a growing season, and I only had so much space.

These limits pushed me to be more creative and try things I otherwise wouldn't have tried if I'd had rows and rows of space. I started squeezing herbs and flowers around the edges of my raised beds and then packed the area between those smaller plants and the large plants in the middle with leafy greens and medium-size plants. I could now grow a dozen different plants in the same space that used to host just one.

If one plant doesn't do well one season, it's okay because I still have herbs, leaves, taproots, and fruits from other plants. Don't they say variety is the spice of gardening?

The Pros of Intensive Planting

- Retains soil moisture
- Helps with weed management
- Allows you to grow a wider variety of plants
- Imitates how plants grow in nature
- Gives you lots of little harvests every day
- Increases overall health of the garden
- Holds more visual appeal and interest

PRO NUMBER THREE

The third benefit is more production. The greater the variety of plants in a space, the higher the likelihood of having something that's ready to harvest at any given time.

Think of a large plant like eggplant or melons, something that takes anywhere from 60 to 90 days from planting to produce for you. During that time, the plant needs to stay in the garden and be tended regularly while it's growing and doing its thing. Those can be long and boring months for you if that's *all* you've planted. Your harvest basket will be collecting dust, and you've got an entire raised bed that doesn't produce for you for weeks.

But if you plant your bed with medium-size and small plants around that large plant, you can harvest from those other plants on a continuous basis while you're waiting for the large plant to mature.

In one of my raised beds, for example, I can harvest chives, clip leaves from my lettuce and arugula plants, and pull some radishes every single day, all while I'm waiting on my Napa cabbage to form a full head over its 60-day lifespan in the garden. Each day means something I can come and harvest from while I wait for longer and larger plants to produce.

This keeps the garden interesting. It's hard to feel motivated to go out to a garden when there's not a lot happening there. When I was just growing tomatoes, I didn't love going out to tend the garden because it was like, "Well, there they are again. They're still cherry tomato plants... still growing." I never feel that way now because there's always something I can put in my harvest basket.

Just to be clear, when I say you can harvest more, I don't mean that you're going to get to harvest more from every single plant. What I mean is you'll get to harvest a wider variety of produce and there'll be more things coming more often.



PRO NUMBER FOUR

The fourth advantage is an increase in overall garden health. **Think about nature**—picture a national park or some place where plants are growing in their natural habitat without much influence from people. Are those plants spaced in rows three feet apart with lots of bare soil in between?

I'm going to guess that's not what you're picturing. Because it doesn't naturally occur. Unless you're in the desert, but even in the desert, if you stumble upon a plant, it's probably going to be with other plants. It's very rare that you would see just one plant all by itself or even just one type of plant.

You often see towering trees next to medium-size plants with lots of low-lying smaller plants all around. They all work together so they can thrive and reproduce.

The best way to imitate nature is an intensively planted garden featuring a wide variety of plants—an ecosystem inside of your garden bed. Each of my raised beds has plant diversity; just one half of a raised bed, for instance, might contain chives, flowers, radishes, cabbages, Swiss chard, kale, and sugar snap peas. All that in about nine square feet of growing space.

I'm sure you've heard of the popular gardening term “**companion planting**”. The idea here is to plant things that grow in the same season and work together in terms of their size and duration.

And that's exactly what intensive planting is. We're filling a space with small, medium, and large plants that all prefer the same growing season, and they all work together in harmony. The flowers attract pollinators and beneficial insects, the chives keep pests away from the kale and cabbage leaves, the peas fix nitrogen into the soil—each plant does something to create a healthier environment inside of your garden space.

In companion planting, some plants will:

- deter pests
- act as a trap crop for other plants
- attract beneficial insects
- provide shade for smaller plants
- add substances to the soil
- pull nutrients from deep within the soil closer to the surface to benefit plants with more shallow roots
- suppress weeds



If you just have a couple plants growing in a space, the chances that they'll contribute one, let alone several, of these benefits to your garden is slim to none.

PRO NUMBER FIVE

I'm moving heavily into opinion territory with this final pro, and that is the visual interest of an intensively planted bed. It is so much more attractive to me than a sparsely planted bed or space that holds only one thing.

The Gardenary method of intensive planting is a hybrid of the **Square Foot Gardening method** and row farming. I was originally inspired by the beauty of the kitchen garden at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Charlottesville, where the plants are in these long, beautiful rows. Much of the appeal comes from the repetitiveness of the plants' forms, one right after the other, but you need a lot of space to grow this way.

The Square Foot Gardening method plants intensively within squares, which, to me, loses the visual appeal of a row garden, but it allows you to pack in more plants than you would in a row garden.

I started planting using a mix of the two when I was planning and tending my Rooted Garden clients' gardens in Houston. I wanted their raised beds to look really full but also have some kind of order. I knew if I had one plant here and another one there, they might not be able to find what they were looking for.

The Gardenary way involves an intensively planted space (like the Square Foot Gardening method) filled with plants in rows so they can be easily found. These rows overlap with other rows so that you see a wide variety of textures and colors and movement in the garden. In a raised bed just 2.5 feet wide, you could have anywhere from three to five rows of different kinds of plants. This setup has a lovely overall effect.



In addition to increasing the variety of plants and production and improving garden health, you'll create a space that's stunning.

You might be sold on intensive planting already. Go ahead and read the cons anyway so you know what you're getting into before packing in those plants!

THE CONS OF INTENSIVE PLANTING

I'll introduce you to the cons by putting the **Intensive Planting Pledge** here. Taking the pledge is meant to be a positive undertaking, but it does show you what it will cost you to put more plants in your garden. I'm sure you can pick out the parts that make it a bit tricky—or at least time-consuming—to pull off this type of growing.

Now, raise your right hand and read the Intensive Planting Pledge aloud:

The Intensive Planting Pledge

- 1 I will tend my garden weekly—maybe even several times per week.
- 2 I will prune my garden regularly and use the harvest as often as possible.
- 3 If some plants are getting crowded, I will remove the ones that aren't as important to me.
- 4 I will double-check on my plants so they feel cared for, even though I have a lot of them in a small space.
- 5 I will be okay if not everything works out well because I got to try growing lots of things all in one season, which means I learned way more than I would have if I'd just grown a few rows of one or two things.
- 6 I will not be intimidated by rule followers who tell me I'm wrong for not following plant tag instructions.
- 7 I'll message Nicole when I harvest so much more than any of my rule-following friends (but will do my best not to be too braggy).



Okay, number seven I threw in there to be cheeky, but let's explore how the others can be cons of intensive planting.

CON NUMBER ONE

An intensively planted bed requires more attention from you, the gardener. I don't see weekly tending as a con, but some people might.

If I only planted a row of Napa cabbages, my only tending tasks would be making sure there are no pests on the greens, watering, and returning to harvest after a couple of weeks. If, on the other hand, I planted a variety of plants in a small space, I'd need to check frequently to ensure each plant has enough space, is receiving enough sunlight to grow to its full potential, and feels cared for. (More on your weekly tending tasks in Lesson Three.)

Think about it this way: If you were to plant a large vegetable patch, your tending and harvesting tasks would be clustered together, but you'd still perform a lot of labor. With an intensively planted kitchen garden, you're just spreading out when you perform the work.



CON NUMBER TWO

If you're scared of pruning or if it's your least favorite garden task, then intensive planting is not for you. Pruning is essential when you're packing in so many plants. Failure to prune away the older leaves of a cabbage plant, for instance, could mean that they shade the Swiss chard trying to grow from seed next door.

You'll need to regularly prune your large and medium plants to make room for the medium and small plants you want to grow around them.



CON NUMBER THREE

If plants are getting too crowded, you might have to remove some. Every season that I plant intensively in the garden, I eventually have to pull something out and lose it. Last season, the cabbages growing down the middle of two raised beds were crowding my lettuce plants, which were more important to me. I opted to take out the cabbages, and even though I cut them up and made sauerkraut, it felt like a loss because those cabbages never had a chance to fully mature.

So, here's your warning: When you practice intensive planting, there may be some plants that you end up having to pull prematurely just to make room for the things that are more important to you.



CON NUMBER FOUR

You'll make plenty of mistakes along the way, so you need to be okay with the fact that not everything will work out the way you hoped. I recently planted some onion seeds nearby radish and spinach plants. Even though the onion seeds came up, they didn't do well, and that's because the radish and spinach leaves

blocked all their sun. If I had pruned more carefully and supported the onions more, they could have thrived.

Intensive planting is like playing basketball. You might take twenty or thirty shots but only make ten of them. You're growing a ton of plants with the knowledge that you might lose some of them. Even so, you brave those losses knowing that you're still going to have way more production than if you'd followed the rules.



CON NUMBER FIVE

Packing in the plants can sometimes lead to an increased likelihood of pests and disease. The moment I post a video or picture of raised beds planted the Gardenary way on social media, I receive comments like: “Don’t you get mildew?” and “Don’t you have slugs?” and “Aren’t there more pest issues because your plants are so close together?”

That is where the pruning and tending come in. You can prevent a lot of the pest pressure and risk of disease by staying active in your garden space. Even so, you might end up with powdery mildew if too many leaves are touching each other and not getting good air flow. You might get more slugs because there's too much leaf matter on the soil level. The more leaves you have in a space, the more opportunities there are for pests to hide.

To me, the pros definitely outweigh the cons. (Surprising to no one, right?) But you get to decide what's best for you. It's your garden. If you still want to give intensive planting a try, let's dig further into the Gardenary method.

02

The Plate Planting Method

I'm so excited to introduce you to **Gardenary's Plate Planting Method**. Your life will be forever changed—at least as far as planning and planting go.

I mentioned the pivotal gardening book *Square Foot Gardening* before. We owe so much to the author, Mel Bartholomew, and all that he brought to home gardening. As I got more and more into gardening, however, I realized that I didn't love his technique for gardening in squares.

He's an engineer, so it makes sense for him. But I'm more of an artistic type—an aspiring designer, let's say—and I don't think squares work in the kitchen garden. I've never seen a square plant, except those that were cut that way. Plants tend to be circular. As I planned out gardens for my clients, I found myself needing to draw circles to represent plants in the garden space.

I realized, over time, that common household plates are the perfect shape to represent the different sizes of plants you might grow in the kitchen garden. Plates in five different sizes can be used to represent both plants you're going to sow directly by seed and plants you're going to transplant to the garden.

Let's explore the Plate Planting Method by looking first at extra-small plants.



EXTRA-SMALL PLANTS



For the smallest kitchen garden plants, I use little dipping/condiment bowls. The ones I own have a 2.7-inch diameter, but you could actually use something even smaller.

THESE EXTRA-SMALL PLATES REPRESENT PLANTS SUCH AS:

- Carrots
- Radishes
- Beets
- Small lettuces
- Peas (even though a plant like sugar snap peas can get rather large, it grows up, rather than out)

As I'm laying out a garden space, I can easily visualize how I could fit three or four rows of four each of these extra-small plants in one square foot using these little condiment bowls.

SMALL PLANTS



Next up, we have our small plants, which can be represented by tea saucers, something about 4 to 5 inches in diameter.

TEA SAUCERS REPRESENT PLANTS SUCH AS:

- Small heading lettuces like romaine or buttercrunch
- Arugula
- Spinach
- Mizuna
- Chives
- Garlic cloves
- Onions

You might note that your tea saucer is almost exactly the size of a homegrown onion bulb. This method, then, makes it really easy to visualize how many onions you'll be able to grow in a space.

These plants are just a little larger than the last group, so you could perhaps fit six to nine of them in one square foot.

MEDIUM PLANTS



Salad plates tend to be about 8 to 9 inches in diameter and are perfect to represent medium-size plants in the garden space.

SALAD PLATES REPRESENT PLANTS SUCH AS:

- Swiss chard
- Basil
- Peppers
- Bush beans

You'll typically fit one salad plate per square foot of bed, with room on the edges for smaller plants.

LARGE PLANTS



You'll use dinner plates to represent what I call large and long plants in the garden space. Most dinner plates are about 12 inches wide.

DINNER PLATES REPRESENT PLANTS SUCH AS:

- Cabbage
- Kale
- Tomatoes
- Eggplants
- Bush cucumbers
- Broccolini
- Mustards
- Collards

If you were to hold up a full head of Napa cabbage, it would be almost exactly the size of your dinner plate. It might be harder to visualize a tall plant like dinosaur kale, but at maturity, it has a similar diameter.

These plants will require right at or a little more than a square foot each in your garden space.

EXTRA-LARGE PLANTS



You'll use serving platters or large dishes to represent extra-large plants in the garden space.

SERVING PLATTERS REPRESENT PLANTS SUCH AS:

- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Squash
- Zucchini
- Pumpkins
- Potatoes

These plants will need several square feet of garden space to themselves to grow to maturity.



XS PLANTS

carrots, radishes, beets, small lettuce plants, peas



SMALL PLANTS

romaine, spinach, chives, garlic cloves, onions



MEDIUM PLANTS

Swiss chard, basil, peppers, bush beans



LARGE PLANTS

cabbage, kale, tomatoes, eggplants,
bush cucumbers



XL PLANTS

broccoli, cauliflower, squash,
zucchini, pumpkins, potatoes

How to Lay Out Your Garden Space with Plates

Okay, now that you know what each size of plate represents, hopefully you can start to see how you could lay them out on your garden bed (yes, literally place them on the soil) and plan out your garden. Pressing a plate rim into the soil to represent each plant can really help you determine how many of each size you can fit.

The circular plates help you picture what the plants will look like once they're all grown in. That cabbage seedling might be as small as a tea saucer when you first move it to the garden, but the dinner plate will help you remember that it won't stay that way for long.

Place some dinner plates (or serving dishes) in a line down the middle of your beds to see how many large (or extra-large) plants you can accommodate. Always start with larger plates so you know how much space will be available on the sides of the garden after you've planted the larger plants.

If you have an entire bed that hasn't been planted yet, you can simply place your plates on the soil and move them around to see how your plant priorities will fit in the space (assuming you don't mind your plates getting a little dirty).

Then, play around with how you might add some salad plates and tea saucers around them. Will you need to stagger or plant in straight rows? Can you fit some condiment bowls in a line along the very edge of your bed?

The smaller plates will help you figure out how you can fill in empty spaces around those larger plants. Remember, the goal is to avoid bare soil in your garden. The fun really begins when you start interplanting large, medium, small, and very small plants all together using our intensive planting method.

If you can't get a plate to fit in the space without extending over the edge of your bed, that's an indication that the plant won't have the space it needs to grow to maturity and stretch out its roots if it were squeezed in there. Fill in that space with a smaller plate instead.

If you've already planted all or part of your garden, I recommend taking one of each of the plate sizes out to your garden and holding each size over where you'd like to plant something to ensure you have enough room once last season's plants leave the garden.



This is how plates can help you plot out your beautiful and intensively planted garden. Even after planting this way for years, the plates always help me find I have more space available than I thought was possible.

Now, go take all of your plates from your kitchen—Cooking? Who needs it?—put them in the garden space, and map out your planting plan. You might just see new possibilities where before you only saw bare soil.

03

How to Plant & Tend Your Garden Intensively

Picture a raised bed filled with cool-season favorites: Napa cabbages, all different types of lettuces, carrots, spinach, and radishes. The garden has played host to some of these plants for at least 60 days, and it's now time to begin transitioning to plants that will grow better in the warmer months, such as eggplants, tomatoes, and peppers.

But... How do you go about beginning that transition?

This is what some might consider the tricky part, so I'm going to walk you through the steps I follow to intensively plant a garden that's already filled with plants and keep these beds full at all times.

Steps to Intensively Plant Your Raised Beds

STEP ONE

We begin with a little housekeeping. Clear the soil of any debris around where you'll be planting, either with your hand or a small rake. Prune the older, lower leaves from the plants already growing in the garden space. This is both your first step to intensive planting and a general tending tip, as those old leaves and debris on the soil just attract pests. At the same time, you're also creating more space for the new season of plants to be planted.

Picture a mature cabbage plant. Imagine removing all of the older leaves on the outer edge of the plant. You can take those leaves inside and enjoy them; plus, you've freed up some space in your garden. It's a garden win-win.



STEP TWO

Keep your pruners that you used in the first step handy. Before adding new plants to the garden, harvest anything that's ready to be pulled. Again, this will create more spots for new plants in your current or upcoming growing season.

Radishes popping up from the soil? Harvesting those radishes will free up an entire row along the edge of your garden space for something new. And now you have garden-fresh radishes to enjoy. Another garden win-win!

Got a lettuce plant that's been unproductive? This is a great time to just go ahead and remove it.

Remember the Intensive Planting Pledge? Some plants will be sacrificed when you need more space. Not everything has to grow to full maturity, and that's okay. Enjoy the leaves it did grow and make way for something else that will produce better for you.



STEP THREE

Now that you've cleared up some space, add a little compost to your beds to ensure there's enough nutrients in the soil for the next set of plants and to support the plants already growing in your garden.

Put on a pair of gloves and spread a 1- to 3-inch layer of compost over the areas where you'll be planting new things. It's also a good idea to take handfuls of compost and place them around the bases of plants that you've just harvested from to help hold them up after you've lightened their load.

If you have plants already growing tightly together in the space, avoid just dumping out a bag of compost and getting their leaves dirty. I add almost all my compost by hand.

I recommend mushroom compost if you don't make your own from kitchen scraps, though any finished and fresh compost will do.

Adding compost is a great way to feed your plants by increasing the nutrients in the soil without the risk of burning them (which can happen with fertilizers). Compost not only gives you a healthy planting space for your incoming plants, but it also benefits the existing plants that receive a little side dressing of nutrients.



STEP FOUR

The time has come to tuck in new plants based on the Plate Planting Method. As a reminder, always begin with larger plants. It's important for something like broccoli that takes up a lot of space for a long time to be given an established place to grow first; you can always return and fill empty spaces around that broccoli with smaller, faster-growing plants like arugula or lettuce.

If you're adding plant starts, dig a hole deeper than what you'll need, then backfill it a little bit to loosen up the soil for the incoming plant. This hole should be twice as wide as the plant's root ball. I like to use a hori hori, which is narrower than a spade or hand shovel so that I can dig without disturbing the roots of nearby plants.

Remove your plant from its container and gently loosen the roots with your fingers before placing it in the hole.

You may find that an older plant is shading something you've just added to the garden, and that's okay. A little shade will be welcome as the new plant settles in, and the older plant will most likely be leaving the garden soon anyways. Things might also feel a bit overcrowded as one plant begins growing next to another one that's finishing up.

You might add, for instance, young cherry tomato plants that you've started indoors right next to your sugar snap pea vines. You'll stagger your tomato plants about one foot apart along the base of your trellis, but it won't look like they'll have any room to climb up the sides until those pea plants come out of the garden, which they'll be ready to do shortly.

Remember that mature Napa cabbage that you imagined cutting leaves from in step one? Picture adding

two little pepper plants in the space that you freed up by pruning the outer leaves of the cabbage. You're tucking those peppers in so tightly that you have to hold back the leaves of the cabbage plant to even see what you're doing.

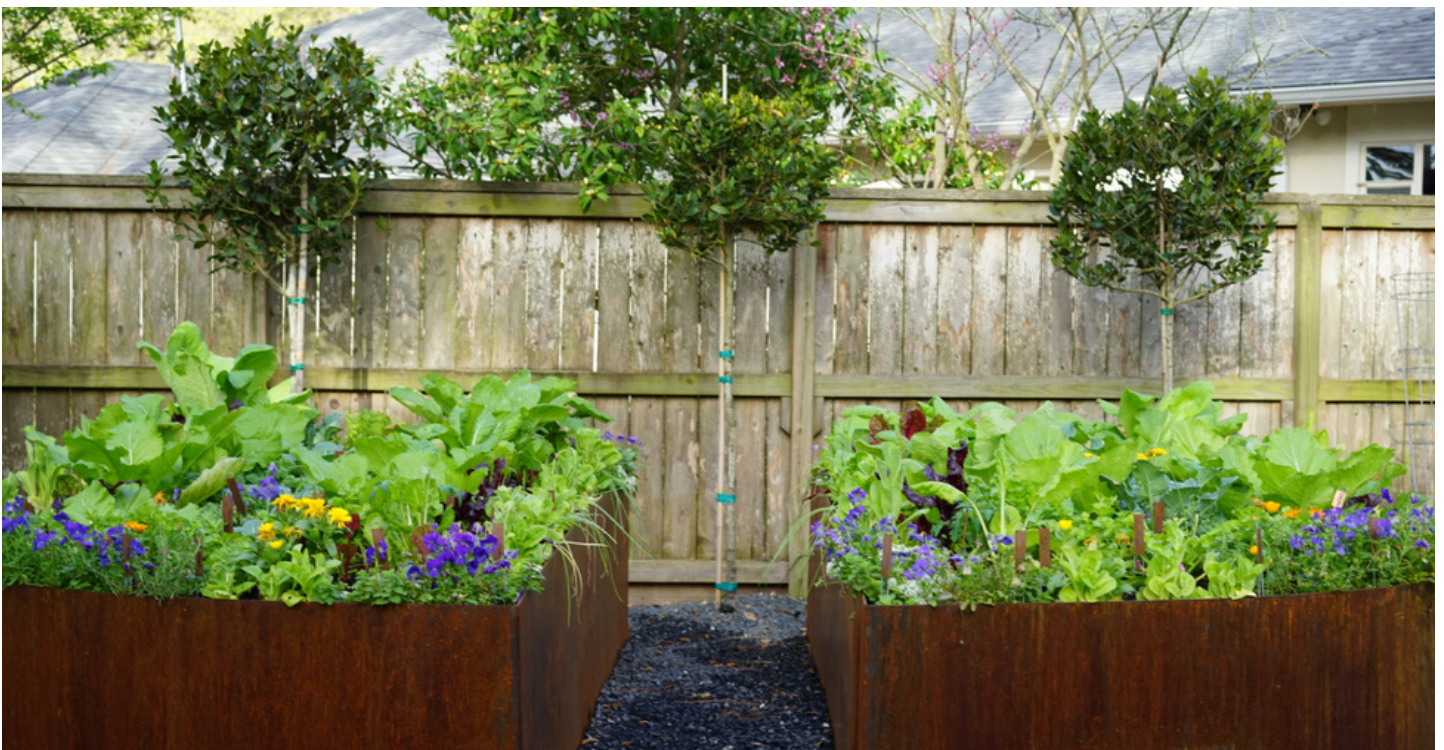
Those little peppers may look crowded for a bit, but they don't actually need a lot of room yet. You're about to remove your cool-season cabbage to make room for these warm-season plants just as the peppers will be establishing themselves in the garden. Once last season's plants are gone, those peppers will have the dinner plate's worth of space that you planned for them.

What you don't want to have happen is the Napa cabbage comes out of your garden and there's nothing there to replace it. Then, you'd have to wait months and months for the next plant to grow in. The idea is to create a revolving door in your garden—one thing in just as another is on its way out.

Each season is not a clean sweep but a gradual turning over as you harvest, add new plants, harvest a bit more, and so on. In the case of the transition between cool and warm seasons, you'd get to enjoy several weeks of harvesting from plants like lettuces and radishes and cabbage while your peppers and tomatoes are already getting established for their growing season.

This is how you can add, let's say, a large plant like eggplant, another large plant like kale (which can be kept smaller by frequent harvests), another large plant like tomatoes (which will grow up a trellis), and several medium plants like peppers to a garden bed that's already filled with last season's plants.

And don't forget to add some small-size flowers in the corners of your raised beds to support these fruiting plants.



STEP FIVE

Give your new plants a nice watering in to welcome them to their new home.

Whatever you did on one side of your bed, repeat on the other side so that you can achieve that nice symmetry for maximum visual impact.

And that's how we practice **out with the old, in with the new** the Gardenary way.



Weekly Tending Tasks for an Intensively Planted Bed

Here's the beautiful part about intensive planting: Those "chores" that many gardeners dread, like weeding and fertilizing, are no longer our main focus. We don't have to weed. We just prune. And most of the things you'll prune are edible. That means lots of delicious things for you to enjoy fresh from the garden.

With intensive planting, you'll spend most of your gardening energy encouraging more production through these tending tasks.



TASK 1: WEEKLY PRUNING

If you want to pack in the plants, you have to cut them frequently. Think about all those lower and outer leaves of large plants like cabbage, kale, and Swiss chard. Each one of those older leaves that you cut away is a form of pest protection and gives your other plants more access to air flow and sunlight. Plus, you've given the pruned plant more energy to focus on creating new leaves instead of supporting old leaves.

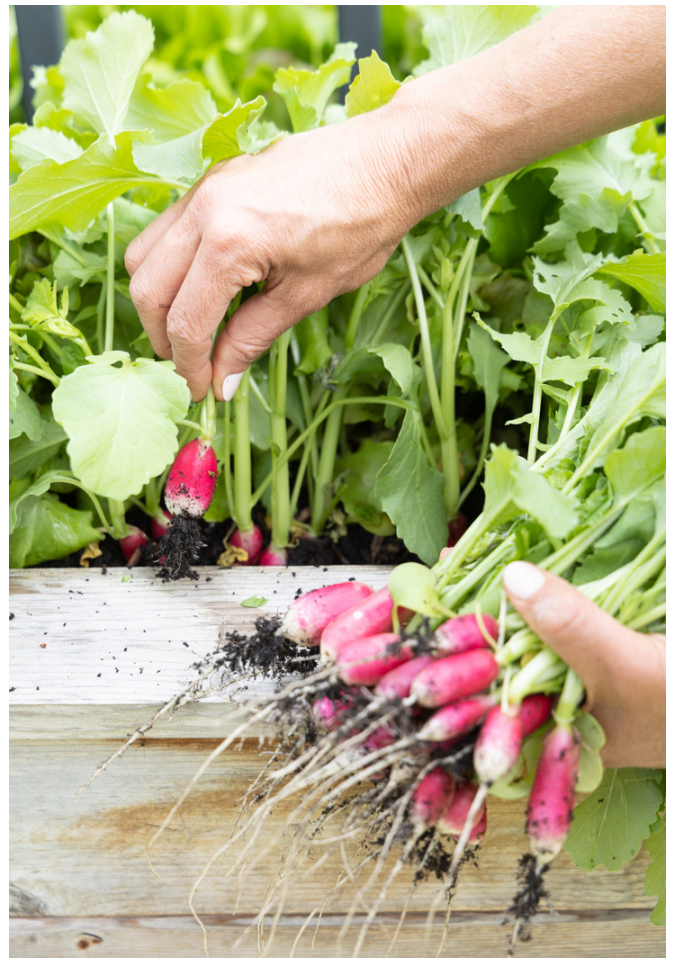
And it's not like you're throwing those leaves away. You get to enjoy them, which brings us to task two.

TASK 2: WEEKLY HARVESTING

Harvesting is really the main job you'll have in an intensively planted garden. Even when you're just starting out, you'll be able to harvest small leaves from herbs and salad greens while you're waiting on larger plants to mature. You can enjoy fresh, gourmet salads every week if that is your goal!

Always having something to harvest is what keeps you coming out to the garden. You'll be able to skip past certain things in the grocery store, which never ceases to be a wonderful feeling.

Be careful, though, not to overload your kitchen with too much of one harvest at once. Pick what you can use and enjoy in the next few days—you can always return and harvest more later (unless, of course, you're planning to invite your friends over and have a harvest party!).



TASK 3: WEEKLY PLANTING

Whenever an empty space opens up in the garden, take that opportunity to plant something new there. Remember, there's no need to have bare soil. Planting something can mean sowing seeds directly in the garden, transplanting a seedling you've grown from seed indoors, or adding a start you've purchased from your local nursery or CSA.

Here is why I consider planting a weekly task:

When you plant all of your plants at the same time, they all mature at the same time and you end up with twenty heads of romaine lettuce that need eating, STAT! When I first started practicing intensive planting, I often ended up with too many leaves or fruits to handle at once.

I learned that it's better to have the same type of plant in different stages of growth in the garden. This is why you should add a few plants to the space on a weekly basis instead of all of your plants at once.

Succession sowing means planting a row or two of seeds at the same time and then returning in a couple weeks to sow more seeds. If you successively sow radish seeds over the course of several weeks, you'll be able to harvest only those that are ready, enjoy them in your kitchen without being overwhelmed with produce, and plant something new in the space that's been cleared up. That new plant will now be growing in different stages as you continue to harvest radishes and add more of the new plant.

To give another example, let's say you have a row of Napa cabbages growing along the middle of your raised beds but it's getting hot outside. You could harvest some entire heads when they're ready and leave other cabbage plants to keep growing. In the spaces you're clearing up, you could add some eggplants. You'll be planting them at different times, so you're staggering when you can expect fruit to ripen.

Intensive planting also works best when you keep the stages of growth of different plants in mind. Say you want to grow broccoli, mustard greens, and onions. Broccoli is an extra-large plant, and the traditional way of planting might involve growing nothing but broccoli in a bed to give it the space it needs. But who wants to sit around and wait for broccoli to grow while there's nothing else to harvest?

Not me.

You can place mustard greens (large) around the broccoli and onions (small) around the mustards. Picture a serving platter in the middle of your raised bed surrounded by dinner plates and tea saucers. In reality, it might not look great at first, but eventually, you'll have the mustard greens really taking off as the broccoli rises in the middle and the onions become established in the corners. You'll need to prune the lower leaves of the growing broccoli plant to ensure the onions and mustard greens have enough sunlight.

This works because the onion plants won't grow too large before the mustard greens are done. Once the greens are removed, those onions will have the full space they need to form a small bulb. Now, the onions are not likely to turn into very large bulbs when planted this way, but you'll still be able to harvest onion greens and, like I said, small bulbs. (If you want large bulbs, onions are best planted on their own).

Make sure to keep your upcoming temperatures in mind during your weekly planting. If your rows of spinach are bolting (or going to seed) in the heat, pull them and plant some warm-season greens like arugula, mustard greens, or mizuna in their place.



TASK 4: WEEKLY REMOVING

Intensive planting and succession sowing mean that you'll often have plants that are ready to be removed from the garden space. Perhaps these plants are bolting, struggling, or just not producing well for you.

If you're having a hard time removing something, just think of what you'll be able to grow and harvest in that space instead. Another gardener might look at a garden and see a cabbage plant that's struggling to form a head. An intensive planter would see a spot for an eggplant, or perhaps several cucumbers that will grow up an obelisk trellis (to be installed once the cabbage is removed), all surrounded by bush beans.

The best way to remove plants is using the no-till method since pulling plants up, roots and all, risks upsetting the roots of neighboring plants. Use scissors or a clean pair of pruners to cut at the base of the plant you're removing, just above the soil line.

Picture a row of arugula plants that are going to seed. You can't expect more growth from them and the flavor of the leaves will be compromised. It's clearly their time to leave the garden space. By mowing them over, essentially, you remove them without disturbing nearby plants or the soil and make room

for the next delicious thing you'd like to grow. The stems and leaves that you've removed are great additions to your compost pile.

The downside of the no-till method is that you do end up having to plant around some cut-off stems lingering in the soil. You always have the option to pull up the entire plant for a clean break from the garden. But, in addition to disturbing nearby roots, you also disturb the beneficial microbes that have been developing in the soil.

I generally cut plants at their base and then cover the remaining plant stems with a generous layer of compost.

TASK 5: CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Whenever I demonstrate adding plants to an already packed bed, I pause to wonder at what point my students will begin to worry I'm unhinged. I prefer to think of my planting style (and myself) as ambitious.

Imagine a bed filled with large, medium, and small plants. What if I told you that I would try adding an extra-large plant to this bed?

I've actually done this before. I've grown pumpkin and watermelon plants, both extra-large, along the edge of my raised beds so that the vines (and eventually the heavy fruits) drape over the side. The plants grow toward the walkway instead of toward the other plants growing in the raised beds. Each time I attempt this, I know that it might be a failure. And I'm okay with that.

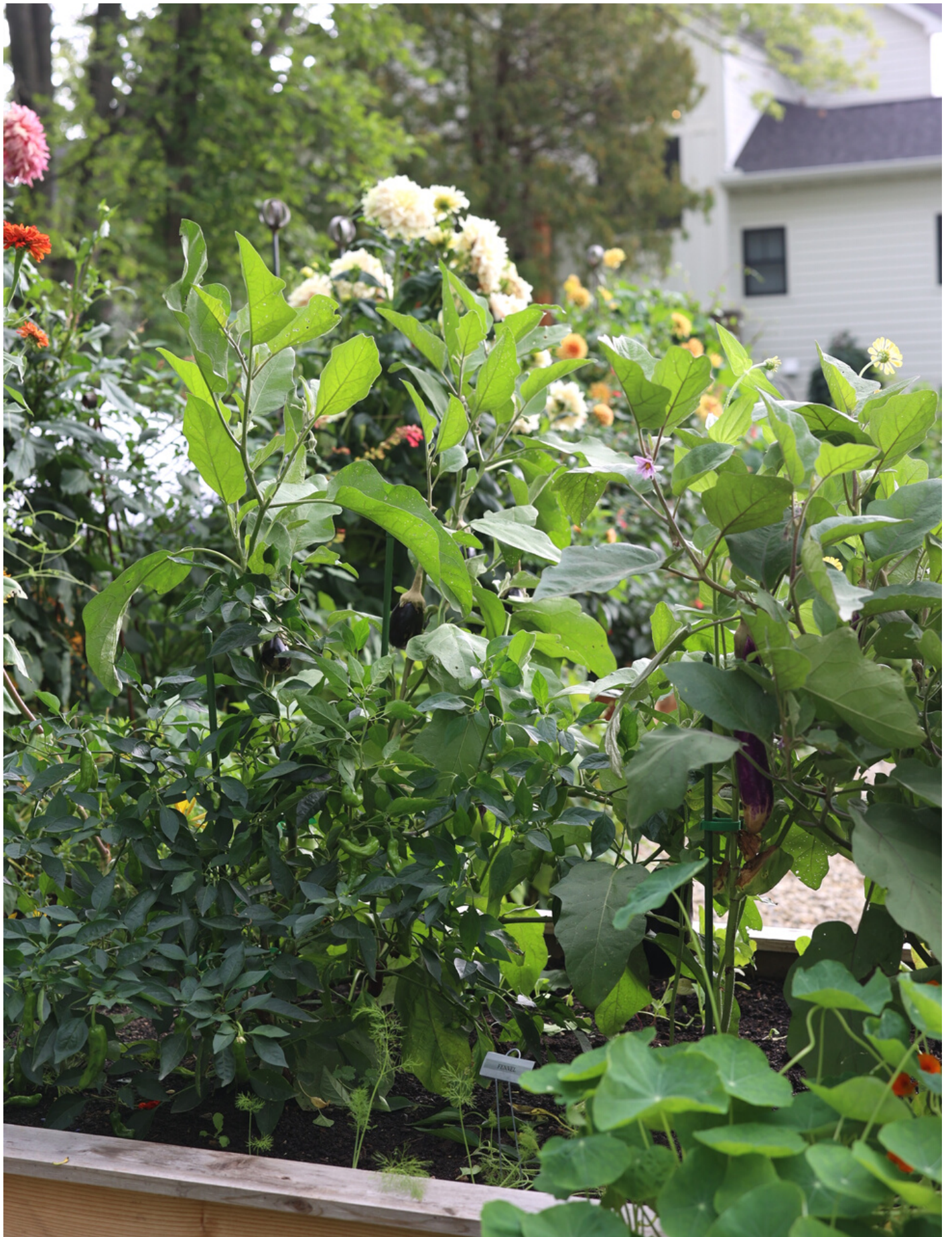
To make intensive planting work, you can't be afraid of failure. Be ready to put things in the garden in places you wouldn't have considered before. If it doesn't go well, you'll learn a lesson, and (hopefully) you'll still have plenty of other things growing that you can harvest from thanks to your diversified planting portfolio.

One of the reasons I have so much fun and so much success in the garden is because I'm not afraid to be unconventional. I don't feel a need to do something just because other gardeners consider it normal. And now, I'm giving you a free license to have fun and be unconventional in your own garden. Turn your garden into a lab where you can try new things and not follow the rules.

Don't be afraid of something not working out. Holding yourself back is not how we learn or make new discoveries. If you think about it, everything we know collectively about gardening and farming came from other ambitious people who were just trying stuff out, right?

Plus, it's not as though you have to live only off your kitchen garden. It's great to enjoy the things you harvest from your raised beds, but if your broccoli never forms a head, you can still find broccoli at the grocery store. If you want to feed your entire family with only things you've grown, you'll need a farm. That's not what this is about.

Gardening is more about learning, growing your own abilities and knowledge, experiencing the magic of plants growing beside each other, and making your garden as beautiful and interesting as possible so that you can't wait to step outside and see what's happening.



04

Plants That Should *Not* Be Intensively Planted

I've just told you that I don't mind failing, and believe me, I've failed to grow a good number of plants over the years using the intensive planting method. That's why I typically don't recommend using this method to grow the following types of plants.



ROOT CROPS

It's best to give carrots and beets their own space so that they always have access to the sunlight, nutrients, airflow, and water they need to develop their large roots. I've found that when these root crops are too close together, they either don't come up at all or they germinate but then die.

When I do plant carrots in my raised beds, I plant them in their own row with nothing else tall nearby. The closest plants might be something like arugula, and even that I would plant far enough away so that its leaves won't shade the growing carrot plants.



If you'd like to grow a lot of carrots or beets, I recommend having a raised bed (such as a 4ft x 4ft space) dedicated entirely to these root crops.

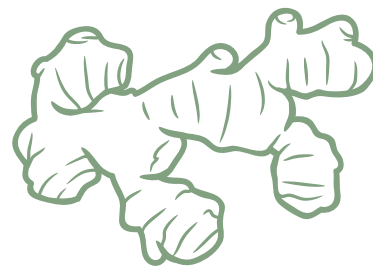
The exception to this warning against intensively planting root crops would be radishes. Radishes are quick and small, so they don't really need a lot of space. I read once that you should plant carrots and radishes next to each other because the radishes will finish quickly and leave more space for the carrots to then mature. I tried this for several seasons in my garden and always found that the radishes flourished while the carrots were too crowded. So, squeeze your radishes in, but plant your carrots and beets in their own space.

TUBERS & RHIZOMES

Like root crops, tubers and rhizomes grow underground and do better with their own space. Sweet potatoes, potatoes, ginger, and turmeric don't work very well with the intensive planting method. They need a lot of room under the surface, they create large canopies above the surface, and it's hard to predict how large they'll grow before producing. Just one sweet potato plant can easily take over an entire raised bed.

I tried once to grow sweet potatoes underneath okra and black-eyed peas. The okra was able to grow tall enough to avoid the huge leafy mass created by the sweet potato plant, but the black-eyed peas were smothered.

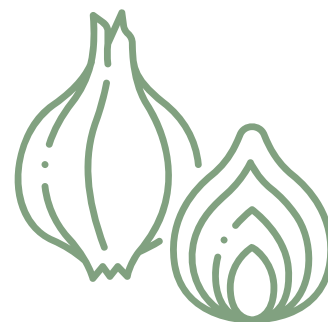
I learned my lesson and now grow potatoes and sweet potatoes in the ground the way you would in a row garden.



BULBS

Garlic, onions, and shallots should be planted in their own space if you're after large bulbs.

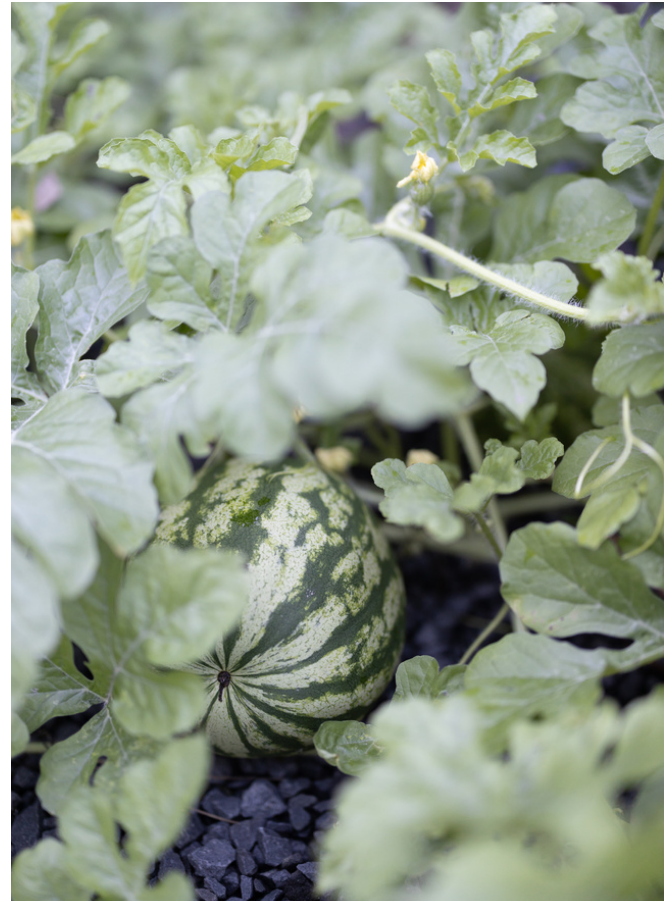
The exception would be if you're confident you can time their growth just right so that other plants are finishing up just as your bulbs need more room under the soil and plenty of sunlight shining on their greens above.



CUCURBITS

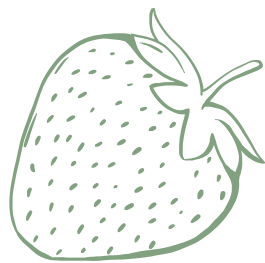
This group includes squash, zucchini, gourds, pumpkins, and melons. Squash, zucchini, and large gourds grow such a big canopy of leaves that they generally overshadow everything else around them. You risk not getting good production from whatever plants share a raised bed with them.





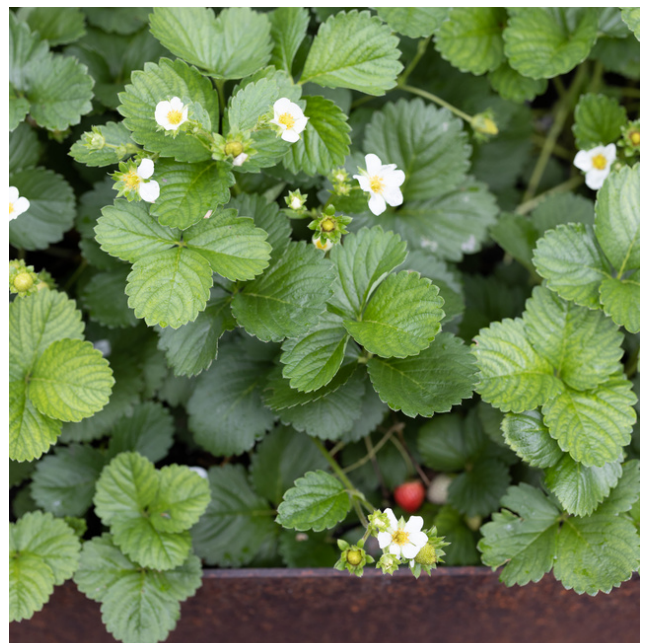
Pumpkins and melons can be grown so that their vines trail over the edges of a raised bed. If you're not comfortable having your plants grow over the sides like that, then it's best to just turn your whole bed over to these plants and not try to grow anything else during that time. You could also plant these cucurbits in the ground following a row garden style so that they can sprawl out all they want.

PLANTS WITH RUNNERS



Strawberries, mint, lemon balm, and oregano all spread themselves by sending lateral shoots, or runners, under the surface. It's best to give these plants their own space if you're not ready to aggressively keep them in check.

Otherwise, get comfortable with the idea of one day having a strawberry-only bed.



Besides the plants mentioned above, most other edible plants can be packed in for a beautiful, productive, and healthy garden. If you're still set on growing mint or garlic in your raised beds next to other plants, feel free to experiment. It's your garden, and these are not hard and fast rules. You'll figure out for yourself which plants you love planting intensively.



Conclusion

I hope these pages have removed the mystery of how you can fit so many plants into one small raised bed, as well as inspired you to pack in the plants in your own garden.

Once you begin practicing intensive planting, you'll look at raised beds and see all of the possibilities instead of the limitations. You'll treat every day in the garden as an interesting experiment. You'll add your favorite plants in each size category so that there's always something you can harvest and enjoy from your garden space while you're waiting on larger plants to produce.

No more **“I would love to do that, but I don't have enough space.”** The intensive planting method allows us to grow so much variety and enjoy so much production in every square foot. So, even if you're just starting in a little container or a small raised bed, I hope you have a new vision for what's possible.



There isn't a right or wrong way to break the plant spacing rules, and the rule follower inside you might struggle with defying those plant tag authorities. But I dare you to join me in planting your garden as full as possible. Commit to the seven components of the **Intensive Planting Pledge**.

Speaking of the pledge, let's conclude with another opportunity to take the Intensive Planting Pledge and appreciate this unconventional gardening journey you are embarking upon:

The Intensive Planting Pledge

- 1 I will tend my garden weekly—maybe even several times per week.
- 2 I will prune my garden regularly and use the harvest as often as possible.
- 3 If some plants are getting crowded, I will remove the ones that aren't as important to me.
- 4 I will double check on my plants so they feel cared for, even though I have a lot of them in a small space.
- 5 I will be okay if not everything works out well because I got to try growing lots of things all in one season, which means I learned way more than I would have if I'd just grown a few rows of one or two things.
- 6 I will not be intimidated by rule followers who tell me I'm wrong for not following plant tag instructions.
- 7 I'll message Nicole when I harvest so much more than any of my rule-following friends (but will do my best not to be too braggy).

After you practice intensive planting for several seasons, you'll find a happy balance for how much you think is too much and how little is too little. There are still seasons when I wish I'd planted more and others where I'm handing kale off to neighbors. Even after packing in hundreds of plants, I still have surprises and disappointments. That's part of what keeps it interesting.



I'd love for you to keep in touch with us at Gardenary regarding your intensive planting wins and losses. Send us pictures or videos. Share your successes with your friends, your family, even your neighbors. You never know when the work you're doing and the magic you're creating in your garden space might inspire someone else to pick up a shovel and dig in.

Maybe one day, you'll get a message from a fellow gardener that says, **"Dear you, it appears that you are breaking the rules. Please tell me more... because it looks fabulous!"**

It means so much to me that you're part of the Gardenary community, and I hope that you keep growing with us for a very long time. Now, head outside and plant some more plants already! I like to say if something's worth doing, it's worth being intense about it. So here's to breaking the rules in the very best way!

join the movement

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