

The Principled Gardener

After 50 years of basic organic food gardening, I have finally begun paying attention to the principles that guide my choices and actions - not that I have come to them easily, or all at once, or all alone. Sustained gardening is of necessity a journey for the gardener, one that can take them beyond award winning varieties, professionally formulated chemistries and magical soil additives. For many the journey becomes a portal into the nature of nature, the nature of food and even the nature of the gardener. For we all seek and find ourselves somewhere in the garden – as imperfect as it may be.

Over the last few years, my garden (usually preceded with some adjective like “food” or “kitchen”) has become more than a place to grow food and more than a way to beautify the yard. In fact, never would it delight the eye of a landscape architect or grace the pages of Gardening Magazine. However, there are patches of beauty throughout the year, mixed in with the heartbreak of withering leaves, brown spots, gnawed stems and chewed fruit. Seems all the players in my garden are focused on their own needs rather than mine.

I sometimes stand in the ragged tapestry of green beds and marvel at how little there is to eat. What is for dinner – often drives me to the store and yet the garden has had a profound impact on our diet. In part because of what has grown there (memory being a persistent aspect of eating) and in part because of the qualities that we had discovered in the food. Food from the garden has informed our taste, so that we now require the flavor and nutrient density found in the olden style, pre-industrialized, earthly grown fruits, vegetables, eggs and meats. Yes, they can be found here in Las Cruces. The garden also provides a space for seeing and observing as well as a trampoline for my intellectual exercises.

Most of my garden looks like the gardener is ignorant of the rules or at least fails to comply with the standards for clear cutting, tilling, timing, rotating and spacing. That is an accurate observation, which brings me to the principles that are ultimately responsible for the look and function of the garden.

Basic Principles of Sustainable Food Gardening

- The sustainable food garden is a biological community of diverse organisms, an ecosystem that includes the gardener.
- The processes and activities for starting a garden are different from those needed to maintain a garden. It is not necessary or desirable to start a garden over again every year.
- The gardener is as cultivated by the garden, as the garden is by the gardener.
- The food garden is an intentional collection of species assembled to meet the gardener’s food preferences. However, locally adapted varieties will be the most productive and often the best flavored.

- Plants affect each other. They have synergistic and symbiotic relationships both above and below the soil surface. They grow best when in diverse relationships with other plants.
- Some food plants are more “wild” than others are. They need less gardener intervention and management and will reseed themselves endlessly in their season requiring only thinning and watering.
- The garden and gardener benefit from saving seeds.
- Weeds and pest insects are important members of the food garden community.
- Plants that bloom and produce seeds contribute to the well being of all organisms in the garden community, including those living in the soil.
- Healthy garden soil is more than a substrate to hold roots, water and chemical nutrients; it is a complex living community. Healthy soil is essential for producing healthy food.
- Digging, plowing or roto-tiling the garden damages the soil community and soil structure.
- Soil should only be disturbed as required to sow seed, set transplants and harvest roots and tubers.
- Decay is part of the living cycle.

Now that I have this, as yet incomplete, set of Principles how do I use them. Next month I will continue this exploration with some *Guidelines for a Sustainable Food Garden*. Should this wet your appetite for more about sustainable food gardening, I recommend reading:

The One Straw Revolution – Masanobu Fukuoka

This publication is difficult to locate today, but is available on the web at (<http://fukuokafarmingol.info/fover.html#ov17>)

Synergistic Gardening – Emilia Hazelip

Emilia was a permaculturist and student of Fukuoka who researched sustainable market gardening in southern France. Her writing is available on the web at (<http://fukuokafarmingol.info/faemilia.html>)

The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book – Ruth Stout

One of several publications by Ruth Stout, all with a similar theme of not digging and mulching to sustain a healthy food garden. Although published in 1971, it remains readily available through most booksellers.

Till next month

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