

1999

Do Organic Watchdogs Work?

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Recommended Citation

Hinkamp, Dennis, "Do Organic Watchdogs Work?" (1999). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 803.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/803

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GARDEN NOTES

DO ORGANIC WATCHDOGS WORK?

By Dennis Hinkamp

June 1999

Summer-09

You want to keep cats and postal workers away? Buy a big, mean dog. You want to keep aphids away? Buy a big mean marigold. The jury is still out.

One theory I am often asked about is “companion planting,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. The idea behind companion planting is pairing certain plants with others to improve the growing conditions or to surround some plants with companion plants to ward off certain insects.

Companion planting has been a controversial subject among gardeners for many years, he explains. Some swear by the idea while others point out a lack of scientific evidence to support it.

“In my opinion there are many plants that certain insects simply do not like,” Goodspeed says. “While at Washington State University I did a small amount of research on gardening plants and mites. Mites love some vegetables, but will not tolerate those with waxy leaves. I found too, that the smell of certain herbs repels some insects. Research has also found that most insects and other pests are specific about which plants they attack and destroy.”

Those who practice companion planting steadfastly believe it reduces insect problems, he says. The idea is that fewer insects invade the desirable vegetables when planted next to those that repel the pests. Although this sounds good in theory, Goodspeed says he has seen ravaged vegetable plants surrounded by marigolds and other so called, repellent plants.

In short, most of the research done at universities on companion planting indicates it is ineffective, or the results are inconclusive at best, he adds. This does not mean it will not work in your garden. But, it should make you stop and consider whether it is worth the time and effort.

“One problem with companion planting is selecting the plants, since no one plant repels all the insects, Goodspeed says. “Marigolds are a good example. They are often used to repel whiteflies and some aphids from vegetable and other plants. Although it is true that whiteflies do not like marigolds, mites and slugs will search high and low for a good marigold patch to enjoy. So, while repelling whiteflies, you may invite all the local slugs and mites into the area. Which is worse?”

Another concern with companion planting is the room it requires, he adds. Do you want your vegetable garden filled with unwanted plants? Weeds are enough. Garlic and onions are fine in their place, but not spread all over the garden. Most vegetables, especially beets, tomatoes, cabbages and a few others, grow better and healthier when they do not have to compete with plants growing close by, even if they are companions.

“My last concern is how complicated gardening becomes when trying to control one simple pest,” Goodspeed says. “I have seen matrix charts of vegetable gardens developed to determine plant spacing and the location of companion plants. They are more complicated than tax forms. Gardening should be easy and fun.

“The real trick to keeping pests away from vegetables is to simply maintain healthy plants. They are not as susceptible to insect damage as those that are struggling to survive. Healthy plants also recover more quickly from minor invasions.”

Healthy plants start with great soil, he explains. Add plenty of organic matter each year. Be certain to provide the necessary nutrients by fertilizing before planting and adding nitrogen to those plants that need it throughout the season. Add two to three inches of mulch around the base of the plants to conserve moisture, reduce weed growth and competition. Another important element is to water deeply and infrequently.

If you still need a plant companion, consider a nice lawn ornament, he says.

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