

Square Foot Gardens

Square foot gardens are just that – little square plots that you can fill as you like. If you have lots of square foot plots together, and others are gardening those around you, you may want to plan your crops along with them so that, viewed all together, you have created something visually stunning.

Square foot plotlets are generally created on beds that are between 15cm and 30cm deep. This gives the plants access to plenty of rich nutrients, while maintaining good drainage. You could add a little vermiculite or sharp sand to your soil to aid drainage.

The planting is simple as there are no plant spacings to remember. Instead each square has either; one, four, nine or 16 plants in it depending on the size of the plant.

Instead of pulling up plants that are overcrowded, dead, in the wrong place, or taking up too much room, which can disturb the root system of others, just snip them off at soil level with scissors.

Start with the soil

The soil is the engine of your garden. If you keep the soil well fed and appropriately watered your plants should thrive.

- 1. Clear weeds**
- 2. Add food** – good homemade compost or bought farmyard compost would be best as it adds healthy bulk. You could also try fish, blood and bone (slow release) or even Growmore although Growmore is not organic. Both of these will feed the plants but not keep the soil in good condition. Another good fertiliser is 6X – buy online.
- 3. Plant crops** – either as seeds or as small plants. Don't do this until the soil and the weather are warm enough – often well into April for vegetables, and at the start of June for flowering annuals.
- 4. Water** – as near to the roots of the plants as you can get. Use a small watering can or a plastic tonic water bottle with small holes made in the top. Easy to control for inexperienced gardeners and easier to get in under leaves.

Warning – different fruit and vegetables 'families' attract different pests and diseases. And different families take different amounts of nutrients from the soil. It is therefore best if you do not plant members of the same family in the same space every year. Try and leave a gap of at least two years. This is called a **rotation**.

Vegetable 'Families'

Alliums – the onion family including onions, garlic, leeks, shallots, chives

Brassicacs – the cabbage family including cabbage, kale, Brussels sprout, cauliflower, broccoli, turnip, radish, oriental greens

Cucurbits – including squash, courgettes, cucumber

Legumes – including peas, runner beans, French beans, mangetout peas, sugarsnap peas

Potatoes – these are especially prone to pests and diseases. Best to grow earlies. Aubergines, tomatoes and peppers are all members of this family (**solanaceae**) but usually you grow all of these inside in Scotland

Roots – including carrots, parsnips, beetroot

Seeds and plants

To get the best from square foot gardens it is probably an idea to bring on or buy in seedlings and then plant these into your plotlet. This has at least two advantages: you can start things off inside a bit earlier, and you will be planting out a strong plant that will better withstand all that the weather, birds and slugs can throw at it!

Things to try: Edibles

Vegetables: lettuce, carrots, mini cauliflowers, cabbage, dwarf French beans, shallot sets, rainbow chard, kohlrabi, leeks, beetroot, radishes, purple kale, chives, oriental greens, garlic, rocket and watercress (in the soil)

Edible flowers: pot marigolds, nasturtiums (trail over the edges of the raised bed), violas, borage, primrose, hyssop and herb flowers

Herbs (perennial): thyme, sage, rosemary, garlic chives and ordinary chives, buckler-leaved sorrel, parsley, spearmint (plunged in the soil in its pot to stop it escaping), bergamot, lavender, lemon balm, oregano (for pizza) or salad burnet

Fruit: alpine strawberries, standard strawberries or Cape gooseberry (in summer)

Decorative only

Perennial: Winter hellebores, snowdrops, spring bulbs set deep below the soil

Winter/spring bedding: Sweet William, wallflower, polyanthus, pansy and bellis

Summer bedding: huge choice including snap dragon, geranium, petunia, lobelia, gazania and French marigold

Summer annuals: (scatter a few seeds on the soil amongst other plants): nigella (can dry the pods at the seasons end), poached egg plants, 'Ladybird' poppies

References

Bartholomew, Mel *All New Square Foot Gardening* (2nd edition) Cool Springs Press 2013

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