



Homestead Gardens

Davidsonville, Maryland

Companion Planting

There are several definitions of “companion planting.” It may refer to plants that mutually support each other, thus making good companions. There is also a definition of companion planting that focuses on plants that are compatible, needing and liking the same growing conditions. It is this definition that we will be discussing here.

I look at companion plants to be compatible in both an esthetic and a horticultural sense. We look at plants from a design perspective and try to place plants that are both pleasing to the eye and interesting in their relationship to others around them. We then look to make sure that they share the same or very similar needs and that their growing location can satisfy those need. If they can meet both criteria, we designate them as companion plants.

For shade plantings, we examine our choices of plants from those that thrive with little direct sunlight. We then find that these plants desire soils with a high percentage of organic content and have pH readings within the acid range. But then it is obvious that some of these plants differ in their preference for soils that are consistently moist or consistently dry. Some of these plants have deep roots and do not compete with plants that have mostly shallow root systems. Other plants have similar roots systems and compete aggressively for the same soil space. We must make choice based on **compatibility**, rather than just similarity of plant requirements.

The prime objective of companion planting is to be able to design and successfully maintain the landscape. We do not want plants that have opposite moisture needs, dissimilar light requirements and cannot develop to their full potential if they are planted next to each other.

If we follow this line of thinking and group our plants in the landscape according to this idea of compatible growing conditions, we will be able to maintain this garden setting by supplying common needs and eliminating compatibility conflicts.

Here are some of the characteristics that plants share as companion plants:

Sun/Shade: It stands to reason that putting together plants in the same garden location that have different sunlight needs would be counterproductive. In the nursery, plants are identified and often located by their sun or shade needs. There are even plants that would grow well in both sun or shade and become our most flexible allies in mixed sun/shade beds.

Dry or Moist Soil: Often, our soils maintain either a dry condition because of the lack of water-holding capacity, or a moist condition because they can

effectively retain added soil moisture. Besides light requirements, we must also see which type of moisture environment our companion plants share. But be careful not to make general assumptions. For example, shade areas can be damp places. But more often than not, dry shade is a common occurrence, especially underneath trees. So some shade plants, such as ferns, have members that prefer moist soil, while other varieties prefer dry soil. Ferns may not be interchangeable in both dry and moist soils.

Soil pH: Sometime we plant what seem like compatible plants that share sun and moisture requirements. But another characteristic of compatibility is soil pH. I have seen many a garden where yews grow along side azaleas. They look nice together and do very well in similar soil conditions. However, yews tend to prefer less acid soils and relatively high pH, while azaleas must have very acid or low pH. They may grow together only because the Yew can tolerate acid soils where the pH is not too low. Unfortunately, the azaleas have almost no tolerance for pH conditions above the acid range. Conflicting pH requirements means that plants may not grow to their maximum potential if they are forced to grow in soil whose pH is outside their acceptable range.

Root systems: Growing together often means competition as well as compatibility. Roots of neighboring plants compete for water and nutrients contained in the same soil. If both plants have aggressive roots systems that compete at the same level of soil, problems are sure to arise. Roses are plants with deep roots. A good companion to roses are plants that are shallow-rooted, which seek water and nutrients at a different level than the roses.

Diversity to deter pests: Companion planting, in itself, is a good thing, in that it naturally keeps the damage done by plant pests to a minimum. Specific insects and diseases often target specific species of plants. Even one species of aphid does not prey on another species of plant nearby, even though that plant is also prey to a different species of aphid. Having a diverse mixture of different plants limits the amount of breeding and access any one species of pest has on the garden as a whole.

Companion planting means planning for which plants make up a garden or container ensemble. If all the shared characteristics are considered in this planning, the group will be easier to maintain and will be less under stress if all of their common needs are met.