

Growing with GPGP

2003 Spring Newsletter

Welcome to your very first edition of the Growing Places Garden Project client newsletter! By now most of you have received your new garden and some seeds and seedlings are already planted. We have really enjoyed building them for you and hope that we can work together through the growing season to produce some really terrific vegetables and herbs for you to enjoy. The main things to keep in mind right now are **watering your plants and seeds** on a regular basis and keeping your beds **free of weeds**. Mother Nature has been helping a lot with the watering part of this over the last week, but you need to keep up your end of the bargain in order for your plants to grow. There are some tips on these topics later in the letter.

We will be stopping by to check the progress of the beds and introduce new seeds and plants at the appropriate times. We would like to work with you directly as much as possible and will make every effort to let you know when this will take place. After all, we want you to learn how to take care of your garden so that you will be able to do this for yourself in the future. We have both found raising food for our families to be very rewarding and hope that you will too.

Given that, the last frost date is rapidly approaching (approximately May 31) and it will be time to start planting those warm weather crops. Beans and tomatoes immediately come to mind along with the squashes and peppers – yum! Unfortunately, the coolness and dampness we have experienced this year might cause a bit of a delay for the warm crop planting. We will watch how things develop and when the time is right, will be setting up a time with you to plant.

If you notice that something seems to be eating or chewing away at the plants in your beds, check out your Growing Places Growing Guide. It's full of great information to help you with your gardening. Or if your plants are just not looking good at all (we did have some frosts after planting some of your gardens) let us know and we'll be around to replace them. I've been waging a slug battle myself (they love this damp cloudy weather) and a few of my plants got nipped by the frost. It's best to stay on top of any potential problems so that you can obtain the maximum harvest.

And please feel free to call us with **any** questions or concerns you have. There is no such thing as a stupid question – we'll do our best to answer you right away, but many times we'll have to do some digging ourselves to find an answer! We are here to help you make a success of your garden.

Best regards from your fans at GPGP,

Cindy and Kate

Gardening Tidbits

*Never step on
the soil in your
raised beds*

*Compost is
the best thing
for your soil*

What's all this stuff about a bed?

Each of you has received a set of raised-bed vegetable gardens. The beds are framed with kiln-dried untreated spruce and are generally 8 feet long by 4 feet wide by 8 inches deep. This is a pretty convenient size since you can reach the middle of the bed from either side. The wood on these beds should last 4-6 years before they need replacing. However, the good news is you really don't need to replace the timbers. Many raised beds do not use frames and are simply raised mounds of dirt. Once your timbers are no longer useful, they can either be replaced or removed and gardening can continue apace. We opted not to use pressure-treated lumber since the chemicals used for pressure treating can leach into the soil and also into your produce.

Why did we decide to use raised beds? They are much easier to maintain than traditional in ground gardens. The soil does not compact, you get better drainage and the overall depth of that good fluffy soil is likely to be deeper than with a conventional garden. Another benefit is that they are higher so the bending distance for weeding and maintenance is less. You can also put them closer together than your typical rows of a garden since you don't need to get large cultivating tools in between the beds. This makes raised beds ideal for those with limited space.

Now that you understand what a raised bed is, here is the most important thing to remember about your raised beds: ***Do not to step on the soil in the beds!*** This will compact the soil, creating less air space for the roots to grow in to and minimize the ability of the plant to grow and produce yummy stuff for you to eat.

The dirt on dirt

We have added a mixture of soil, compost and vermiculite to your raised beds. Why the latter two? Soil (also known as dirt) needs nutrients, air and moisture to help plants grow. Soil can be classified into 3 basic categories: sandy, loamy or clayey. Sandy soil contains lots of air holes and drains quickly and hence doesn't hold water or nutrients very well. Clayey soil has very few air holes and does not drain quickly which makes it difficult for air, water and plant roots to penetrate. Loamy soil is the best and falls between the two. Adding compost to any of the soil types is a major boost to the soil's ability to support plant growth. Compost, also called humus, is the decayed remains of plant and animal matter. It adds many nutrients to the soil, lightens up heavy soil, adds great moisture retention abilities (very important at this point with our current drought potential) and is in fact the single most important item you can add to your garden over the ensuing years. Since compost does break down over time, it is necessary to replenish it on a fairly regular basis

Vermiculite is actually mica rock heated until it explodes (very much like popcorn) into the little white pieces you can see in your soil. It has a marvelous water retention capability also and will help to loosen up heavy soils. It does not break down over time so adding more vermiculite is not usually necessary.

Gardening Tidbits

Use a gentle mist for seeds

Watering tips

For seeds, it's best to use a gentle mist so as not to disturb seeds with heavy drops (this is sometimes unavoidable when it rains and you end up with something growing a little distance from where you planted it!). Spray bottles or a spray head on the hose that has a gentle mist are good to use for seeds. Moisten the soil, it doesn't need to be soaking wet. It's very important to keep the soil moist for seeds since seeds require moisture and heat to germinate.

Water seedlings at the bottom near the roots

For transplants and plants, it is always best to water at the bottom near the roots. Getting water on the leaves of plants can cause rot and fungus growth, especially on bean plants. If you have no other way to water, then by all means do so. Watering from the top via a sprinkler or hose is better than no water at all. Soaker hoses or a simple cup and bucket are good methods for watering at the bottom. Less water is wasted and more can be directed where the plant needs the water, which is at the roots. Transplants and plants should also be watered in the early morning so that the water has a chance to help the plant during the heat of the day and if any does get on the leaves, it has a chance to evaporate and decrease the possibility of disease. It's important to make sure your plants have enough water otherwise the growth cycle of that plant can be interrupted causing either a poor harvest or potentially killing the plant.

Never let your garden dry out!

The bottom line, however and whenever you can, **water your garden.**

Weed only if you recognize it

Help! I just weeded my seedlings!

How can you tell the difference??? Not very easily, as far as I'm concerned. I tend to wait until I see a lot of the same looking plant in what I believe to be the location that I planted the seeds. Small "weedlings" can be readily pulled once you have identified the seedlings and will not take up too much of the seedling's nutrients in that short a time. Once your seedlings begin to grow, it is important to keep your squares weed-free since weeds can crowd out your plants, steal their water and nutrients and pretty much ruin your crop.

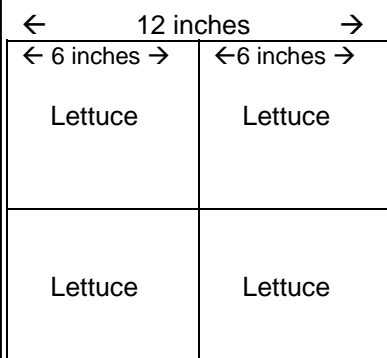
Square foot gardening saves time and money

And just why are my beds divided up into squares?

Mel Bartholomew developed the square foot method of gardening in the late 1970's. The goal is to produce more harvest in less space with less work. The basic principle is to plant your crops in 1 foot by 1 foot "squares". Each square contains a different vegetable, herb or flower (or several squares can contain the same item if it is something you want a lot of). How many seeds or plants are placed in each square depends on several factors: how big the plant gets, how far apart they need to be to develop properly and the particular variety of plant you are growing. In general, the seeds are planted at the spacing that is stated on the seed packet for you to thin to. In other words, if you sow a row of lettuce every ½ inch or so, you are supposed to thin them out to 6 inches between plants. That means if you have 12 plants in 6 inches of space, you need to remove 10 of them between the two outer plants so they may grow to the proper size. This translates into lots of wasted seed and it's often hard to take out all those lovely little plants.

Gardening Tidbits

If instead you only planted the 2 seeds at 6 inches apart to begin with, you have more seeds to plant later plus you don't have to go through the thinning process. And you have also optimized the usage of your garden space. For example, in a square of lettuce you can put 4 plants equally spaced at 6 inches apart as follows:



Rows of lettuce would require more room. This process can be applied to virtually all of your crops and is why we have marked off "squares" in your beds. You can follow the progress of a single square pretty easily, see when weeds invade and remove them, water individual plants and see any potential pest problems quickly. We hope that, by using this method, we can help you grow a large amount of produce in a fairly compact garden space and to save time on garden maintenance.

What is our last frost date and what does it mean?

Many times on a seed packet or a plant tag you see the words "plant after all danger of frost". Well just what does that mean?? In this area, that date is approximately May 31. This varies by a week or two depending upon the weather for the spring, but for the most part using May 31 as a guideline for planting will work well. Generally this means that your cool crops (spinach, lettuce, swiss chard, peas, etc) will be planted before this time while your warm crops (melons, beans, tomatoes, squashes, etc) will be planted after this date. Warm crops are not able to withstand the potentially devastating affects a freeze could have on them which is why we wait to plant them.

Some Gardening References:

Square Foot Gardening by Mel Bartholomew

The Vegetable Gardener's Bible by Ed Smith

The Moosewood Restaurant Kitchen Garden by David Hirsch

*Wait until after
May 31 to
plant tender
crops*