



## FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

### SQUARE FOOT GARDENING

Sue McCormick, Palo Pinto County Master Gardener

There is a lot of talk these days about ways to garden in small areas. "Intensive Gardening" means packing as many plants as possible into a given space. One of the easiest methods of Intensive Gardening is explained as "Square Foot Gardening". It starts by choosing a 4x4 foot area and building a box with at least 6" sides. (untreated lumber, metal, stone, etc.) At the bottom, it is necessary to block grass or weeds from intruding into the garden. Purchased weed barrier works, but a layer of cardboard or 8 layers of newspaper work just as well.

The box is then filled with REALLY GOOD SOIL. Mel Bartholomew, who wrote a book titled "Square Foot Gardening," recommends 1/3 coarse vermiculite, 1/3 sphagnum moss and 1/3 compost (a mix of at least 5 different brands to get a good balance of micro nutrients). Homemade compost is complex enough to fill that requirement. Vermiculite helps retain moisture and sphagnum moss helps things drain. Gardeners have been successful with half native soil and half homemade compost. The idea is to have soil that maintains good moisture without needing water every day.

After the box is filled with soil mixture, a grid is installed breaking the area into 1-foot squares...16 squares in all. Of course the garden can be 4x4, 4x6, 4x8 or any other dimension desired. The 4 foot depth makes it super easy to reach all squares for harvesting and weeding.

The number of plants or seeds in each foot depends on the mature size of the plant. Common spacing is one plant per square for larger plants (broccoli, basil, tomato, etc.), four plants per square for medium large plants like lettuce, nine plants per square for medium-small plants like spinach, and sixteen per square for small plants such as onions and carrots. Plants that normally take up yards of space as runners, such as squash or cucumbers, are grown vertically on sturdy frames that are hung with netting or string to support the developing crops.

The beds are weeded and watered from the pathways, so the garden soil is never stepped on or compacted. A few handfuls of compost are added with each harvest to maintain soil fertility over time.

This gardening method has been employed successfully in every region, including deserts, on high arid mountain plateaus, in cramped urban locations, and in areas with polluted or high salinity soils. It is equally useful for growing flowers, vegetables, herbs and some fruits in containers. All that is needed are a few seeds per square foot, the ability to make compost, water by hand and set up the initial garden.

One of the benefits of this type of garden is succession planting: as each square's crop is harvested, compost is added and the square is replanted with something that will grow later in the season. Companion Planting is also easy. Marigolds or garlic can be planted around tomatoes. Small herbs can be planted around pepper plants. Creativity is easy when one only has to think of a 1-foot area at a time or combining a few for larger arrangements.

There are many helpful websites to be found by just searching "Square Foot Gardening" on the computer. If you have questions, feel free to contact the Palo Pinto Agrilife Extension Office at 940-659-1228.