

THE SQUARE FOOT GARDENING METHOD

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The huge resurgence in the popularity of home vegetable gardening continues. Now vegetable and herb starts are available in nurseries and grocery stores *non-stop* from March to September. The vegetable gardening classes that I taught this past year were all very well attended, as many "first timers" brought shared enthusiasm and common questions.

Local sources of gardening information are always best, especially with vegetable gardening. That being said, one nationally known book should be read by all veggie gardeners, new and old, who are limited for space, time and money – who isn't? Therefore, you need this book! The newest edition of *All New Square Foot Gardening* is in color and has much more information than older editions. It can save you a lot of time and money.

In the full color edition, nationally known Mel Bartholomew, a former efficiency expert/engineer, has set aside the "Abe Lincoln" beard that I remember seeing on public TV as a child, and now sports a moustache.

The History of the Square Foot Gardening Method

In this fascinating book, Mel begins by recalling the story of his discovery of the "square foot gardening method" long ago when he helped start a community garden in his town. He quickly found that many people became disinterested and stopped participating later in the year, mainly because of all the necessary weeding. So Mel set out on his quest to find a more *efficient* way to garden by questioning everything they had done.

The first thing he noticed is that in their community garden, they planted one crop in long rows with lots of working space between rows. Those wide rows became a haven for weeds, and Mel wondered if there might be a way to gardening without roto-tilling and constantly weeding all the path space in a garden. After all one doesn't plant in the pathways. Furthermore, he found that many families couldn't keep up with the harvest of an entire row of cabbages or beans maturing all at the same time.

Most people plant in rows because that's what they see farmers do. Farmers plant in rows, because require machinery to harvest in such large quantities. In backyard gardens you're likely not using machinery to harvesting your beans and tomatoes.

Another main idea Mel questioned was the instruction label on a seed package that described thickly seeding and then thinning to the desired

spacing. Mel thought that seemed such a waste with all those seeds tossed out and all. Why not directly plant seeds at the desired spacing?

Having questioned the two common ideas of row planting and seeding/thinning, Mel came up with the idea of directly planting seeds or starts at the desired spacing in square foot blocks, rather than in rows, *and* at staggered times during the season.

Mel found that most people could reach in about 2 feet to weed in their garden. He therefore came up with the idea of organizing the square foot blocks into 4 ft. x 4 ft. beds – because one can reach into an entire bed that size *without walking on the soil*.

With this method, no repeated tilling is necessary. In one square foot “module” you would plant, for instance, one broccoli plant, 4 lettuce seeds/starts, or 16 carrot seeds at their final desired spacing. During the season, when a lettuce plant is harvested one replaces that location with one bean seed, for instance.

The newer, full color edition has charts for staggered plantings, spacing charts and diagrams, as well as detailed information on all the common backyard vegetable crops. In the end, you spend less money on seeds and starts, use much less space and spend much less time weeding, because you are only maintaining the places where you harvest lies. And square foot gardening is not just limited to veggies; just think of all the cut flowers you could grow using these space and time saving methods.

Critiquing the Square Foot Gardening Method

Mel gives easy to follow step-by-step full color photo instructions for constructing the bed, plant supports and ideas relating to vertical gardening, protective covers to keep critters out, as well as cold frames to extend the growing season.

Mel's Mix

His idea is to create 4 ft. x 4 ft. raised beds *on top* of existing soil/ground, and that a box 6” deep is all you need (I’m wondering about growing big clobbering carrots...hmmm). His soil suggestion is what he calls Mel’s Mix: 1/3 compost; 1/3 peat moss; 1/3 vermiculite.

Doing the math, you will need a little less than a 1/3 of a yard of soil for each 4 ft. x 4 ft. box. A yard of mixed soil is often around \$60/yard or about \$20/box. Purchasing soil in bags, of course, costs much more per box. Another concern I have for Mel’s Mix is lack of “biological life” in the soil.

Mel says you don't need fertilizer. I agree, *if* the soil is alive, and/or you use your own compost! I'll predict that many years down the road there will be this emphasis away from "fertilizing plants" and a new trend in "growing living soil". Mel's Mix may "grow plants", but how nutritionally rich is the harvest?

The 4 ft. x 4 ft. Box

If one decides to use several 4 ft. x 4 ft. boxes, one encounters what is called in restoration ecology as "a high perimeter-to-area ratio"; that is, you have a lot of edges to maintain.

What is actually between your 4 ft. x 4 ft. boxes? Lawn? Gravel? Carpet remnants? Remember that if you have lawn between your boxes, you will have to edge or "weed eat" to keep the edges of the boxes tidy. Believe me a bunch of square raised beds in the middle of your lawn with grass growing up the sides will look like a mess.

So instead you decide to try putting down weed barrier and use bricks or gravel. You *never* want gravel or bricks immediately next to lawn. Grass will eventually grow in between bricks creating a high maintenance situation. Furthermore, how does one mow/edge next to rock without the rocks shooting out everywhere? And grass growing into gravel is not fun. Always use lawn edging or some barrier to separate lawn grass from bricks, rocks and gravel!

Get creative with your 4 ft. x 4 ft. box. Again, Mel's idea for a 4 ft. x 4 ft. raised bed is so that anyone can reach across the bed to plant, weed, etc. *without walking on the soil*. I would be inclined to use a longer 4 foot wide bed with a couple of stepping stones strategically spaced down the length of the bed to help me get to the other side without walking on the soil.

Why a square box? Certainly a 4 ft. circle would work. Often our home/gardens already have many straight lines. Perhaps create a curved 4 foot wide kidney shaped berm in the middle of your lawn. For those who have difficulty getting down on the ground, 3 foot tall raised beds, can be created for ease of maintenance and harvest. Of course, that requires more soil/cost, *initially*.

Remember, the success of the square foot gardening method depends on you replanting in each square foot block during the season as plants are harvested. Most people are accustomed to planting in the spring, and weeding and staking during summer. So you'll replant during the year, but you will spend less time weeding over one season.

Conclusion

The *All New Square Foot Gardening* is an excellent book for people, like many, who are either “trying all this for the first time” or are trying new ways to “really get something” from their veggie garden. Try integrating the principles of square foot gardening into your vegetable garden this year.