Grow to Give

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COMPANION PLANTING IDEAS
FROM HEAD GARDENER IMOGEN JACKSON

Companion planting is a way of planting two or more types of plant together which will not compete for space, light or nutrients and will be beneficial in some way for at least one of the plants. In nature, plants do not grow in monocultures (large areas of just one type of plant), but instead grow together meaning that usually 'pests' and diseases rarely cause widespread destruction. They are kept in balance by each other.

Growing flowers in amongst your vegetables not only makes the area look more attractive, but is essential for successful organic growing. Depending on the plants you choose, they can encourage beneficial insects, make it harder for 'pests' to find your crops, suppress weeds, reduce the need to water, encourage essential pollinators to your crops, improve your soil quality and effectively fertilize the soil through nitrogen fixation.

Calendula (see left) and Cosmos are good examples. They attract beneficial insects such as hoverflies, ladybirds, lacewings and parasitic wasps, whose larvae will then feed on aphids.

Calendula are also said to deter eelworms, wireworms, whitefly and other 'pests', so are a great companion plant for tomatoes, cucumber, carrots, potatoes, marrows roses, beans or peas.

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Nasturtiums are great planted with French and Runner beans, as they can act as a sacrificial plant. For example, blackfly will be attracted to the nasturtiums rather than the bean plants. They also deter aphids and whitefly, so can be planted with fruit trees, tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers and marrows. The leaves and flowers also taste great in a salad, before the blackfly invade, and are a wonderful, pretty, easy to grow flower in their own right too.

This year in Horatio's Garden Oswestry, I'm growing Phacelia with roses in raised beds which are grown for cutting. They have very pretty lavender blue flowers laden with nectar and pollen, so bees and hoverflies adore them. Hoverfly larvae are voracious aphid, thrip and scale insect eaters, so they're ideal to encourage in an organic garden.

Phacelia is also excellent as a green manure, so can be dug into the soil enriching it with nutrients. It also prevents nitrogen leaching and suppresses weeds while it grows and will make a beautiful contrast with the roses.

I also like to grow basil with tomatoes, as basil is said to repel flies and mosquitoes, as well as improving the flavour of your tomatoes. I don't know if that's true, but they certainly taste good together!

Many things don't like the smell of garlic and onions, including aphids, so these are good interplanted with strawberries (see right), lettuce, tomatoes, beets and roses. It is not recommended to plant them near peas or beans as they may inhibit their growth.

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Mint repels moths, ants, flea beatles and caterpillars of Cabbage White Butterflies, so they are great to plant with potatoes, tomatoes and cabbages. However, it is a good idea to keep mint in a separate pot as it can take over your garden and might smother your plants.

About 80% of all plant species, including most fruit and vegetables are pollinated by insects. Therefore, encouraging these into your garden and near your crops is an important aspect of companion planting. There are around 4,000 different types of pollinator in the UK, so ideally grow a wide range of flowers. This can be done by interspacing your crops with attractive flowers, or by creating a nearby corridor of mixed flowers. These should include plants which flower early in the year, such as Lungwort (see left) and those flowering later in the year, such as ivy and seedums.

Most importantly, do not spray your plants with pesticides and always try to buy organically grown plants, or grow your own from seed. Unfortunately, most plants sold as 'bee-friendly' will be laced with pesticides.

When choosing flowers for pollinators, avoid 'double flowers'. These tend to have extra petals and are no use to pollinators as they can't get to the nectar and pollen. When choosing plants, pay attention to which ones are attracting insects, as this is often a better indicator than the 'bee-friendly' logo!

A few flowers to attract adult butterflies are: Aubretia; Buddleja (see right); Honesty (Lunaria annua); Ice Plant (Sedum spectabile); Ivy (Hedera helix); Lady's Smock (Cardamine pratensis); Lavender; Majoram (Oreganum); Mint (Mentha) and Sweet William (Dianthus barbatus).

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If you're looking to attract bumblebees, it's a good idea to include: Bergamot (Monarda); Cornflower (Centaurea cyanus); Dahlia 'Bishop of Llandaff' (see right); Dutch Lavender (Lavendula x intermedia 'Gros Blue', see below right); Geraniums; Majoram (Oreganum), Lungwort (Pulmonaria saccharata); Phacelia (Phacelia tanacetifolia); Comfrey (Symphytum spp) and Vipers Bugloss (Echium vulgare).

For hoverflies and other pollinating insects, try: carrots and carrot-family plants (Apiaciae); Convolvulus (Convulvulous tricolour); Cornflower (Centaurea cyanus); Coriander (Coriandrum sativum); Cosmos (see orange flower, below); Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare); Hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna); Ivy (Hedera helix); Phacelia (Phacelia tanacetifolia) and Sweet Allysum (Lobularia maritima). You will need to let them flower, so leave a few carrots and coriander rather than harvesting time before your other plants reach this stage.

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