



## The Benefits of Growing Plants with Multiple Uses

by Tanya Anderson, author of *A Woman's Garden*

If gardeners could stop thinking about their gardens as miniature farms, our growing spaces could become more productive. Though both produce food, vegetable gardens and fields of crops are two different animals altogether. They're easily confused, though, which is why food gardening can be both hard work and expensive. If you try to emulate conventional farming practices in a smaller growing space, you'll end up with gluts, diseases, weeds, pests, and a lot of wasted effort and money. The soil can suffer from it, too, leading our gardens down a path of lower-resilience.

Several years ago, I started experimenting with no-dig gardening, pollinator-friendly practices, and polyculture – growing multiple plants within the same space. All have succeeded in my low-cost organic garden and are smart practices that reduce effort and input and increase yield. Another method that I use to add both delight and a sustainable harvest is to grow plants with multiple uses.

In my mind, a plant that has multiple uses is more than just food. It could be an edible plant also used medicinally, for dyeing, as a companion plant, or as an ornamental. For example, what do you do with a carrot? You can eat it, of course, yet carrot puree can naturally color handmade soap, the leaves are a natural yellow dye for wool and cloth, and you can make decent wine from sugar-rich carrot roots. If you grow colored carrots, it opens up a new creative door.

Companion planting is another way that edible plants can have multiple uses. Many are familiar with the three sisters planting of corn, squash, and beans. Each supports the

other by providing a living trellis, ground cover, nutrients, and attracting pollinators. Other plants benefit from each other too. Dill and chamomile can deter cabbage white butterflies from brassica crops, and edible calendula flowers can attract aphids away from them too. Not only do they help one another, but growing these plants alongside and entwined with each other gives multiple crops in the same space.

Plants that can attract pollinators and that work as green manures are another beneficial combination. Or plants that create material that you can use to build structures. When I cut down my raspberry canes each year, I weave the spent canes into an attractive and practical garden edging. We're also considering adding willows to a boggy area at the bottom of the field and harvesting their whips to create windbreak panels and bean teepees.

Dahlias are incredible cut flowers, and very popular as a garden plant these days. The single petaled types are the ones you grow to attract pollinators, but even the big showy types have uses. Their petals are a natural fiber dye, insects use the flowers to hide in, and all dahlia tubers are edible. Not all are tasty, but several varieties have been, and continue to be, cultivated for the table.

When you're choosing plants for this year's garden, be it a vegetable, flower, or herb, research its potential for more than one use. That way, you can maximize your harvests and add resilience to your garden. A growing space bursting with diverse and useful plants supports both nutrition and the land. It also gives us ways to bring useful plants into the home in various and creative ways.

Tanya Anderson is the gardening personality behind Lovely Greens, and the author of the new book, *A Woman's Garden Grow Beautiful Plants and Make Useful Things*. In the book, she explores plants with practical purposes, including medicinal, skincare, dye, and diverse edible purposes. *A Woman's Garden* will be released on April 6th, 2021, and is available to preorder now.

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