

# In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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## **Our community garden adventure**

As promised, this week I shall tell you about the community garden in which my family is participating. I think some of you might find this helpful and I hope it will encourage many to do the same.

Whether you have none or very little land to garden, have too much shade, are plagued by deer or simply need additional space, there is always that very human desire to grow one's own food. So in answer to the problem, along comes the community garden. This sort of garden also addresses the other very human need - that of company and social interaction.

One of my neighbors, whom I shall call Lady K, for Kind, had property that at one time boasted a thriving vegetable garden created by a tenant. After this tenant moved away, the garden was neglected and fell into disrepair. Lady K expressed to me that she'd love to have it become a garden again and together we talked about how nice it would be to have a group collectively make a vegetable garden.

That was a year and a half ago. For one reason or another it did not happen last year. But this past winter, we got our act together. We made up a force of four families plus Lady K and armed with a set of guidelines, we've begun the process of making of a community garden.

## ***Getting started on our community garden***



The plot is well situated. It is on level ground, has excellent exposure to sun and is enclosed by a fence. Nothing fancy, but certainly functional. The fence was in need of repair, which was taken care of by one of our group. As we are taking up a preexisting garden, the dimensions are already in place. Since the place was so neglected, some major clean up was necessary. To do this job we hired someone. That solved, the rest of the work will be done by all of us.

The vegetable beds created by the previous gardener were narrow and long. They were also mounded beds. To rearrange this layout would need a great deal of work and so, we're keeping the design. Mounded beds work alright, but they are not the most desirable. It is better to have raised beds edged with wood, 2x8s or 2x12s. This contains the soil properly and there is less water run off. I also prefer their neat appearance. So that's what has been done. Now, each family has one long, raised bed in which to grow whatever they desire. We all share two herb beds and two others in which we hope to get our children to raise pumpkins. In addition, there is a compost bin.

The paths between the beds are narrower than I'd like, but it is what it is. They will be mulched over with wood chips. The soil in the beds has been turned over and will have lots of compost added to it. Both mulch and compost

will be obtained from the town recycling center. I envision a barn raising of sorts where all of us spread wheelbarrow loads of compost and mulch. All costs are shared and this makes it quite reasonable.

***Planting choices, an expression of individuality in a community garden***



Once the garden is ready for planting, the individual choices kick in. Weeding and watering is up to each family. Lady K is very generous and does not want any rent - she is so thrilled to have the garden resurrected. However, in good faith, each family is making a small contribution to defray the cost of water. We will cover for each other when vacations are taken and of course, there will be plenty of mutual help, support and advice.

If any of you are interested in forming a community garden of your own, ask around in your neighborhood and gather a group together. It goes without saying that the group must get along. Restrict the group to four to six families, as it is more manageable. You do need to have someone "in charge," that is, someone who can set the guidelines, plan the garden and knows how to proceed. In our case, Lady K has in her infinite wisdom given me permission to be the boss. The others have, equally wisely, accepted that decision. I suspect they are going along because they know exactly how to get back at me should I drive them crazy. That's what happens when you garden with friends.

All of this is very exciting to me as I think this is the way life ought to be. The coming together of friends and neighbors to work the land, raise food, teach our children and learn some lessons ourselves is the bedrock of our existence.

***Reader inquiry: Is it too late to plant perennial seeds?***

Susan asked if she could plant perennial seeds out at this time or was it too late or too cold to do so.

I imagine this is probably something many are wondering and thought it should be properly addressed.

First of all, how and when seeds are started depends on the type of perennial. Many seeds need some time in the cold followed by a warm spell. But there are some general guidelines.

For sowing outdoors, there are advantages and disadvantages. It is easy to do and the plants tend to be more robust and hardy. Also, you can sow the seeds exactly where you would like the plant to grow. However, sowing outdoors is unpredictable because temperature fluctuations can seriously affect germination. In addition, the seeds are often discovered by mice and birds. If the seeds are sown within established beds, they compete with the other plants and weeds and it is hard to monitor their growth. In summation, when sowing seeds outdoors, the gardener has far less control.

There a technique called the plunged pot method. In the fall, sink pots with the bottom cut off into the soil. The pots should be no smaller than six inches but can be bigger. Leave an inch of the tops of the pots above the soil. Fill the pots with soil. Sterilize this soil by pouring boiling water through. Let it cool. Sow seeds. Cover to protect against mice and ants and drying out. Leave it be and let nature do its work. In spring, transplant the germinated seeds. This method works quite well.

In the case of sowing indoors, you have complete control over the amount of heat and water supplied. If you start your seeds at the right time, you can have nice sized plants to plant outside as soon as the ground has thawed. Because of the controlled conditions, germination is quicker. You do, however, need the right amount of space and light to grow plants indoors.

So Susan, at this time I suggest that you start the seeds in pots or seed flats. Maintain the pots indoors or outside depending on what is possible for you. Transplant when seeds have germinated. It might already be a bit late for spring blooming plants but you can start them now for blooming next year. Seeds for summer and fall perennials can be started right away. Happy gardening!

Post Script: Remember those tulips I was forcing? See below.



*They've gone wild!*

*Shobha Vanchiswar has been gardening all her life, the last 19 years in Chappaqua. She received the Golden Trowel Award for garden design in 2007 from Garden Design magazine. Her jewel-of-a-garden here in New Castle was on view in last year's Garden Conservancy Open Day program. She has a garden design business, Seeds of Design. Write her at [seedsofdesign@verizon.net](mailto:seedsofdesign@verizon.net).*