

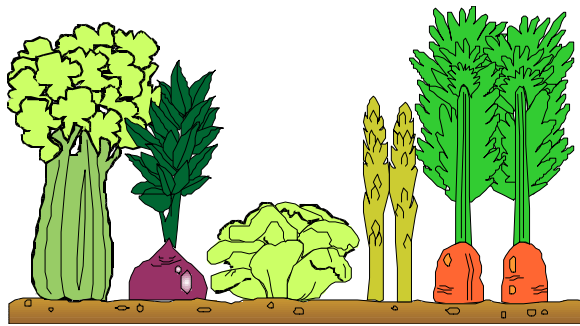
Crowd Control

Are your cucumbers bullying your tomatoes? Do your squashes squash everything else? Companion planting helps keep a garden healthy, but can end up turning into a real mess. There are a few helpful ideas that may help tame those tomatoes. You should learn the cruel but necessary art of pruning, and try using stakes to give wayward vines a home.

If you have tomatoes in cages, you have gotten off to a good start, but they will soon spill over the top and intertwine with each other anyway. Tomatoes have been grown as high as twenty feet. Unless you want to bring a ladder to the garden, this is not very convenient. Prune off many of the new stems or shoots keeping each plant pruned to just a few shoots. This means cutting off a lot of branches that seem perfectly healthy and have lots of buds too. This forces the plants to produce more fruits where you can reach them. It also helps provide an earlier harvest because the plant starts putting energy into fruit production instead of growth. Cages can also be used for cucumbers and squashes. This helps hold the fruits off the ground, resulting in nicely formed shapes, with no rotten spots. The real trick is to plant these crops with enough room to spread out. If you plant in groups of three, a nice mound of soil every three to four feet is a nice distance.

If you are too late for cages, don't despair! You can still use wooden stakes. Get very tall ones and be sure to drive them into the ground at least a foot deep. Use yarn or cloth strips to tie vines to stakes. (There are lots of different products at the garden center for this job.) Don't tie them too tight or you'll cut into the vine. We don't want to save our plants from suffocating one another and just end up doing it ourselves with string! If you have large fruits that may fall from their own weight, try making a sort of a sling out of cloth to hold it to the fence or stake. Nothing is too big for sling, I have seen full-sized watermelons snuggled comfortably three feet off the ground. A nice thing about this technique is that the fruits tend to ripen more evenly and a bit faster too.

The next time you are in the garden and feel the irresistible urge to belt out a Tarzan yell, take a look around and see what you can do to thin out your jungle.



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