

Can You Dig It?

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener



Ahhh! The seductive power of fertilizer! Balanced slow re-lease (store bought) fertilizer that is. I try to keep the vegeta-bles as chemical free as possible (with the exception of slug bait) but the flowers are another story. For some strange rea-son, for years this has meant that the vegetables get ALL the organic material and nothing gets put on the flowers. Gradu-ally, the flowerbeds have gotten more attention. I was able to move good soil from the end of the garden, where soil had built up and was oozing out into the yard. A couple of years ago I started using bark and saw(mill) dust as mulch. This year I bought fertilizer. WOW!

It’s easy to see how chemical fertilizers quickly became stunningly over-used (and hopefully are not now). Suddenly, plants would get green and grow rapidly, getting ahead of weeds and setting bountiful fruit with a single application of a little bit of powder. Prior to the introduction of chemical fertilizers, rejuvenating your kitchen garden or fields was accomplished by spreading loads and loads of organ-ic material (manure, kelp, crushed shells, etc.) every year, usually several times a year. The quick, and much easier, application of chemical fertilizers freed up the farmer or gardener for other activities. Now, we realize the chemical fertilizers are sadly lacking in micronutrients. In addition, an application of fertilizer generally does not provide any organic matter to improve soil structure. While the organic fertiliz-ers available now have micronutrients and beneficial microorganisms, they are still fertilizers. You MUST add organic matter every year; sometimes the old ways are better.

Fortunately, this is relatively easy to do in the form of mulch. The only time I ever see the surface of the soil, especially in the vegetable garden, is after I have raked off the mulch and planted seeds. As soon as the plants are up, and immediately af-ter weeding, I start pushing the mulch back around them. If I’m planting in rows, I mulch in between the rows at the same time I plant. Try it! Hopefully, you will find that you have fewer weeds to pull. This year I experimented with covering some of the larger seeds with fine straw mulch instead of soil.

My first attempt was in the pea patch. I got the peas in somewhat late and ger-mination was uneven. I put only a thin layer of straw over the seeds I broadcast and it wasn’t enough. The peas came up fine, followed closely by the weeds. Very hard to get the weeds OUT of the peas because there aren’t any rows!

My next attempt was with beans. The package says to “cover seed with 2 inch-es of soil”. So, after broadcasting the seed across the bed, I tossed a good 2” of light, short, partially decomposed straw directly over the seeds as they sat on top of the soil. So far, I have beans that are about 4” high, in a virtually weed-free bed! Yee-hah!

A word about plant volunteers. I brought home a bonus with a discounted day lily I got once. It looked like an attractive plant so I let it live. The two plants struggled for a couple of years and then started to take off. For a couple of years I had a good balance be-tween the sword-like day lily and what turned out to be some kind of dwarf euphorbia (related to ‘mole plant’) that is a beautiful red. Now don’t get me wrong I really do like this plant. I also like plants that sort of move around the yard by themselves. I don’t like plants that become aggressively invasive, and crowd out every-thing in their path to take over. This guy is right on the edge of be-coming invasive, but I think can be controlled. Just something else to pay attention to.

I’ve planted corn again this year. Something about the idea of my tiny grandson in the corn was just too enchanting to pass up. So I planted a total of three of my beds to corn. One bed also has a section of firmly supported fencing for the winter squash (which I thought were cucumber plants when I bought them) to climb. I’ll never grow viney squash without a support again. It takes up MUCH less space and keeps the squash off the ground, though they may require additional support if they are large. There is a row of corn on either side of the squash support. Squash and corn are traditional companion plants, so this might work.

In the remaining two corn beds, I over-planted heavily. I have always had some areas where way too much seed came up and others where nothing came up. This was still true, but I have dis-covered that you can transplant corn fairly successfully. I was able to take advantage of those few rainy, cloudy days we had when I was thinning and transplanting, and the corn took it in stride. Un-

fortunately, careful as I tried to be, I’m afraid I wasn’t aggressive enough and that I’m going to have to thin again to get the foot between plants that they apparently need. I hate thinning! If you can transplant some of what you pull out it’s easier, but it’s so hard to throw those baby plants away. If I decide to thin the corn again, I’m going to chop the excess up for dinner!

By some divine grace, I have produced a garden bed worthy of the pages of any gardening magazine. Since the pa-per has en-tered the digi-tal age, I get to share it with you. I don’t know how this came out so good. Cab-bage inter-planted with lettuce and bordered by elephant gar-lic, with a cor-ner of shallots at one end and a cucumber tower at the other. The truly amazing thing is that there is not a single sign of either slugs OR cab-bage worms. This has never happened to me before. I must be doing something right.



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