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Square Foot Gardening
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Have you heard of square foot gardening? It's a system where the seeds or plants are planted in an area the size of a square foot. It is a way of gardening that requires less work, less space and less water. And, it provides food for the table!

The garden is built in a series of 12 inch by 12 inch squares. Each square holds a different vegetable, herb or flower. For instance, the seed package for carrots recommends having the plants 3 inches apart. Space the seeds or seedlings three inches apart in a square such that each plant is the same distance from its neighbors. Different plants occupy different squares. These one foot squares are then grouped into blocks measuring four feet by four feet. Each block now contains 16 different squares and potentially 16 different types of plants. The number of plants per square depends on what the plant is, and how big it will grow. Examples of a few of the most frequently used spacing are as follows: three inches for beets and radishes, four inches for spinach, six inches for Swiss chard, and an entire 12 inch square for broccoli and eggplant. For plants that grow upward, vertical growing can be implemented. Construct a trellis that will support whatever it is you would like to grow vertically at the end of one of the blocks, for example, for tomato plants.

A very important rule in gardening: never step on the soil where you intend to plant something. That will compress the soil removing necessary air pockets. For square foot gardening, pathways are established around each block. The covering of the pathways can be straw, bark or some form of stepping stones.

Maintenance of a conventional garden can be time consuming and tiresome. The amount of time needed using the square foot approach is estimated to be about one hour per week per block for the necessary weeding, watering and harvesting. And with the square system, just enough should be produced to meet your needs providing you planned and planted accordingly. As you harvest

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one square, you can now replant it with a different crop. Rotation of plants is important for health of the soil.

Succession planting is an option, just as it can be done with a conventional garden. Companion planting is also important to help reduce plant pests and enable strong plant growth. Some of the pest-deterrent plants include garlic and marigolds.

Now is an excellent time to start planning your garden. Figure out where the garden will be. Starting small is suggested; one block per family member. This will help you plant only what you will really eat. If possible, have the garden within sight so it can be enjoyed as things grow. Many of the traditional general gardening issues are present such as getting more sun than shade, water needs, fertilization, mulch, and so on. But try laying out your garden in squares and watching it grow: it can make gardening far more satisfying than you ever imagined.

Plan to attend this Saturday's popular gardening class: Spring and Summer Vegetables. UCCE Master Gardener Zack Dowell will help you prepare your garden for delicious spring and summer vegetables. Zack will discuss varieties of plants, planting times, site selection, soil preparation, planting techniques and pest management. The free class is on February 7, from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Also in February, Master Gardeners will begin monthly free gardening classes in cooperation with the Cameron Park Community Center. Join Master Gardener Phyllis Lee, along with Master Gardener/Food Preserver, Mike Pizza, at the fun and educational Citrusmania class. Learn how to successfully grow citrus in the foothills, and also how to preserve and prepare delightful treats with the abundance of fruit from your own trees. The February 10th class is from 9:00 am to noon at the Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, in Cameron Park.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.