

# Back Yard Mixed Canopy Polyculture

With Justice & Sue @ Munson Manor, Campbell River 2015

This small oblong garden patch is eight feet across and is packed with herbs and vegetables. It's our main kitchen garden, and has provided us with daily salads and cooking greens for months. Even during this particularly hot and dry coastal summer it has rarely required water. Dense planting provides groundcover (there's virtually no bare soil). The mixed height canopy provides shelter and agreeable microclimates for lower growing plants.



Although our garden as a whole is designed and managed with perennials as the foundation (trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, groundcovers, etc.) this particular garden patch is mostly annuals and biennials.

Similarly, while the larger garden includes non-edible plants with a variety of other functions, this patch is almost all edible. A small white clover path allows foot traffic into the centre of the patch. Balancing wildness and cultivation, ease and intervention, is a core theme in our garden.

We prefer a hands-off-let's-wait-and-see approach whenever possible. This has netted us many educational experiences, moments of beauty and grace, and more than a few pleasant surprises.

This approach to gardening requires a loosening of control, a spirit of curiosity, and a flexible palate. Meals are shaped by the plants that present themselves. In such a diverse and dynamic garden patch, going out to harvest a salad can easily include an awe inspiring discovery or two. It's quite lovely to suddenly feel lost in a few square feet of garden.



# General principles and management practices

## **Direct, high density seeding**

Rather than transplanting seedlings into careful rows (a labour intensive practice resulting in large patches of bare soil, tender and susceptible young plants and high irrigation requirements) batches of mixed seed are scattered and planted at timely intervals.

## **Strategic thinning and management**

The patch is managed as a dynamic system providing daily yields throughout the garden season. Plants are thinned for eating, as well as to allow space for successive harvesting of neighbouring plants.

## **Friendly weeds are welcome**

Weeds like smartweed (polygonum), lambsquarters, and purslane just showed up and are welcome in our polyculture garden. They provide food, groundcover, bee fodder and mulch.

## **Soil cover**

Keeping the soil covered with growing plants and mulch keeps unwanted weeds at bay, helps retain soil moisture, and feeds the worms and microorganisms that provide soil fertility.

## **Mixed canopy/Verticality**

Bean teepees, corn, and sunflowers provide shelter for lower growing salad greens and herbs. Plant heights range from just a couple inches to ten feet tall. Cucumbers can be seen climbing five feet into the corn.

## **Chop and drop**

As weedy plants like buckwheat and smartweed begin to crowd the system they are repeatedly cut back and used to mulch the soil. By not pulling out the roots, neighbouring plants are not disturbed and the soil structure is maintained. (You'll notice that the soil quickly dries out where plants are uprooted.)

## **Seed saving**

Select plants are allowed to mature, and seed will be collected for sharing and planting next year.



# Some of the plants in our little polyculture patch include -

## **Swiss chard**

Honestly not a family favourite for flavour, but nonetheless a workhorse green for the soup-pot.

## **Green beans**

Blue Lake pole variety.

## **Mizuna**

Incredible mustard green for salads or brazing. Has been holding strong for literally months.

## **Lettuce**

Many varieties.

## **Purslane**

A pretty and low growing weed for salads.

## **Corn**

By request :) Sweet Bantam. An older OP variety.

## **Cucumber**

Easy. Yum.

## **Buckwheat**

From the health food store bulk bins. The leaves are great in salads early in the season (thanks for the tip mom!). Great groundcover and mulch, and the bees love it.

## **White clover**

Planted as a path for access to centre of the patch. Tolerates foot traffic. Bee fodder.

## **Collards**

Never bothered with collards before. I mean, this is kale country right? Nonetheless, it seems very happy here.

## **Arugula**

Easy and tasty for salads!

## **Lambsquarters**

A top weed for salads and cooking.

## **Dill**

Summer freshness for salads and cukes. Bees love it.

## **Smartweed (polygonum)**

Just discovered that it's a good salad green very early in the season, then potherb. Important bee plant. Good for chop and drop mulch.

## **Kale**

Red Russian variety. I mostly leave it alone until after frost. Flower shoots are one of the best things in the garden next spring.

**Thanks for having a peek at a little part of our world!**

Love, Justice & Sue

