

Garden record keeping

Keeping garden records will improve the quality of your gardening experience as the seasons go by. You and your garden are unique, so personal records are important. You'll discover what works and what doesn't, weeding out mistakes and learning to make better decisions.

Why keep records?

'Cultivate' is defined as 'to improve or develop by careful attention, training, or study'. Vegetable gardens need to be cultivated and record keeping can help! The type of information you record depends on what you want to study. Here are a few examples:

Soil management: What compost and soil amendments did you apply? How much? Where? Have they helped improve soil qualities? Have they had an impact on plant growth? Having soil tested every three years is a great addition to soil management records.

Crop management: What vegetables did you grow and which did you like? Where did the seed or plants come from? How much space did it take? When did you harvest? Yields? Quality? Pest problems?

Crop rotation: What crops were planted in each location last year? Rotation makes better use of nutrients and helps prevent buildup of pests.

Harvest and preservation: Did you have a hundred zucchini and only two servings of peas? Did you harvest enough for preserving? Which varieties were better for preserving?

Microclimates: Are some areas in your garden warmer, colder, wetter? Which crops do best in which areas?

Garden layout: Do intensive beds work better than rows? Do raised beds make a difference? Which companion planting combinations work?

Timing: Does planting at different soil temperatures have an effect on germination? Did you plant too early and watch your crops get set back by frost? Or did you plant too late and have the summer heat bitter your lettuce?

Mulching: Does mulching help some (or all) of your crops? What mulch materials work best?

Costs: How much does it cost to grow your vegetables (fertilizers, tools, seed, labor, etc.)? Are some crops more economical than others?

Methods of record keeping

Your record keeping system should suit your unique style and goals. Try to make it as simple as possible. That way, you are more likely to stick with it! Here are a few ideas:

A notebook or binder: Sounds simple enough, right? The trick is getting information from the garden into the notebook or binder! It may be helpful to list out the information you plan to record over the season and then fill in the blanks as you go along.

Each year, make a copy of your garden plan, drawn to the appropriate scale. Keep track of where different crops are planted and plan to rotate crops each year. If you do succession planting, make two or three copies of the plan. Record crops, dates planted, and dates harvested.

If you use a binder, add a few three-holed envelopes or other 'pockets'. Tuck in stray notes, empty seed packs, and photographs of the garden for winter review.

A calendar: A calendar can be used in two ways: to remind you of upcoming gardening activities (e.g. time to start broccoli transplants) and to record what has been done (e.g. applied compost tea to tomatoes). If you use a calendar, try to include a supplemental record keeping space to write down more detailed information, especially notes on what worked and what didn't.

Computer spreadsheet: All manner of data can be managed on a spreadsheet. You could even sort vegetables by harvest date, taste, and Latin names. Imagine the possibilities, and you may soon be writing your own book on vegetable gardening!

Activity 1

Attention to detail.

When keeping garden records, it's important to pay attention to details. Try this puzzle to see how our mind sometimes plays tricks on what we think we see. The answer is at the bottom of the page.

Read the words in the box and count the number of times the letter f (or F) appears.

How many 'f's?

FINE POINT

It is easy to miss the finer points in life. Folk are frequently guilty of falling into this trap.

Activity 2

Down to business.

Decide what you would like to learn from your garden. Make a list of the information you will record. Decide on a method of record keeping that will work for you.

Activity 3

Monthly garden jobs.

Check out the Old Farmer's Almanac for a list of monthly garden jobs (<http://www.almanac.com/gardening/jobs>). Make notes of monthly jobs in your own records for the coming year.

