



A

Dappled Shade Vegetable Garden

By Cindy Murray

At the time my husband, Hugh, and I planted our first vegetable gardens in Northern Arizona, we intentionally designed both of them to be in full sun—I had assumed living in a cold climate meant all vegetables needed at least six hours of direct sunshine each day. We placed five semi-dwarf fruit trees several feet away from two sides of the half-sunken raised bed we fashioned in our back side-yard--I had further assumed semi-dwarf fruit trees wouldn't grow as tall as the apex of our roof, but they did!

We built our second half-sunken raised bed veggie garden in the middle of the backyard and planted an eighteen-inch-tall Ponderosa pine ten feet away. Each year we incorporate well-composted organic matter and more top-soil into each plot.

Now, eighteen years later, our fruit tree canopies provide dappled shade (a type of partial shade) in the side garden through much of a summer day, while the back yard garden receives much more sun with periods of pine tree shade here and there as the sun wends its way across the sky throughout the day. To my amazement, some of our favorite vegetables grow more vigorously in our dappled-shade plot than they do in our sunnier one.



Although our loose-leaf lettuce varieties grow as fast as weeds in in our dappled-shade plot, their seeds need some light in order to germinate. Keeping this in mind, we sow them shallowly, then treat them with frequent mists of water, not full-on irrigation, until they sprout. We sow lettuce within the first ten days of June when threats of frost are over, and the fruit trees are not yet fully leafed-out. We reseed about every two or three weeks throughout the growing season, as we “cut” the largest outer leaves “and come again” a week or two later to harvest the next batch of outer leaves.



Another “cut and come again” veggie, swiss chard, thrives in full sun to part shade. We Master Gardeners recommend rotating crops among different garden sites year to year to prevent the buildup of pests and diseases. For crops like swiss chard and other shade-tolerant vegetables, we simply alternate their planting between our dappled-shade garden and our sunnier one. If you’re not familiar with swiss chard, it is similar to spinach in the various ways it is cooked and has the same impressive nutrients. We grow an abundance of chard for the purpose of eating it year-round. I par-boil it, quickly dunk it

in ice water, dry on towels laid out on the kitchen counter, and freeze it in meal-sized portions.

Beets only need four or five hours of sunshine each day to maintain their tender leaves and sweetly flavored bulbs. Likewise, carrots tolerate low lighting, and the cooler the weather, the sweeter their roots. Bunching onions, or scallions, also perform well in semi-shade.

Kohlrabi is not only one of my favorite garden vegetables, it is uniquely quite versatile. It readily assimilates the flavors of my seasonings while adding texture and splendid nutrients to stir-fries and soups. I relish it raw, peeled, sliced, and served with Ranch dip, or coarsely chopped and tossed into green salads. This globular, sweet and tender veggie grows best in cooler areas, so dappled-shade suits it superbly.

Another veggie high on my “most-loved” list is super sugar snap peas, and they perform admirably in our fruit-tree-shaded garden. We choose a climbing-variety and provide them with wire-framed supports. Inherently, all varieties of peas are cool-season crops and would likely flourish in our dappled-shade plot.



Since Hugh and I first experimented with vegetable gardening in the high country, we’ve gained an understanding that our success with dappled-shade vegetable gardening is partly due to our high-elevation thin atmosphere; light intensity is stronger here than at lower elevations. In light of this fact (pun intended), I think this year we’ll try growing radishes in our dappled-shade garden—they grow but don’t actually thrive in our sunny plot, and I don’t know why. I may soon find out.