

## February Gardening Tips from CSU Extension

February seems to be the ultimate month of waiting for a gardener. It's too early to start *most* seed crops (artichokes, asparagus or other slow to grow/germinate crops being exceptions) and it's generally not amenable to outdoor garden bed preparation due to frozen ground and snowy conditions. So instead planning is the best course of action for the gardener with time on their hands. However, for this month we'll take a little bit of a diversion and investigate introducing some options for diversity into your vegetable garden.

While there are few formal scientific studies, I can point to for the benefits of diversity in the garden, there are some facts about diversity that cannot be denied. Increasing the diversity in your garden means that specific pests cannot grow unchecked in population in the same manner. Intercropping with different species may help to confuse insect pests further or reduce their ability to increase in population. Diversity in the vegetable garden can occur in many ways, it can be planting a wider selection of edible crops, we often grow a small proportion of the available crops throughout the world. More often, however, diversity is increased through the introduction of other plants into your vegetable garden for the purpose of attracting pollinators, beneficial insects etc.

### Beneficial insects

What is a beneficial insect you ask? Beneficial insects are those that protect your plants from predatory insects or pests. Beneficial insects can include lacewings, syrphid or hover flies, spiders, ladybugs, mantids etc. To attract these insects, it's important to plant a variety of species that can serve as hosts for the mature and immature life stages of the insects. In the case of a ladybug this is simple, as they are carnivores, so any plants that are susceptible to aphids will attract them over time. Note: ladybug larvae are far more effective predators than their adult counterpart! In the case of syrphid or hover flies it's more important to plant members of the carrot family, wild carrot, sweet alyssum, dill, Queen Anne's lace etc. Contact your local extension office for a more comprehensive list if there are insects you would like to attract.



Shown above, Ladybug larvae, syrphid fly, lacewing, and mantis, photos from Bugwood.org.

## Companion planting

Companion planting can take the form of planting vegetable crops with other vegetable crops (lettuce under tomatoes for example) which reduces weed pressure and increases yield but can also include the addition of herbs or flowers mixed throughout. Flower and herbs mixed with vegetables can increase visits from native and honeybee populations. These increased insect populations may attract more predatory insects thereby actually reducing insect problems in the vegetable crops. If you have the space you can also add flowering native perennials, shrubs, and trees elsewhere in your landscape to augment a food source for your pollinator friends.



*Note the flowering edible flowers, nasturtiums, at left, ornamental flowers at right with vegetables in the background.*

Many plants can help to attract beneficial insects or pollinators. If you're seeking pollinators, plants such as calendula, sunflowers, nasturtiums, marigolds or borage are a great place to start. For beneficial insects seek out fennel, lemon balm, coriander, caraway, dill etc. Marigolds have shown to have some control for nematodes in the soil when used as a cover crop but may also reduce pests when planted mixed into your vegetable crops (intercropping). Plus, who doesn't enjoy a garden that is both aesthetic and practical! With any of these diverse plants you can plant them in distinct areas or interplant throughout the garden space.

The final point if you seek to play with your native beneficials and pollinators in your garden is to be very aware of what pesticides you may be using. Many insecticides are broad spectrum which means that they are not specific to one type of insect pest. Read labels and apply carefully, and only if necessary. Sometimes a natural system may take some time to catch up, but it often will.

Contact your local extension office for more specific resources, and check out Grow & Give ([www.growandgivecolorado.com](http://www.growandgivecolorado.com)) if you're in Colorado to register your garden for vegetable donations in 2022!