



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



Flowers and vegetables in harmony © Wikimedia Commons/Arnaud 25

Our best friend in the garden, apart from bees, is the earthworm. Who'd have thought it? A worm is a nematode which is a garden pest, but the common earthworm does not eat living plant tissue so is no problem. Did you know that they wriggle around with the aid of tiny hairs on their bodies? They are hermaphrodite, having both male and female reproductive cells but still need another worm in order to reproduce. They lay eggs which hatch into tiny worms and can live for up to 10 years. If you accidentally cut an earthworm in half whilst gardening the fatter, pinker half will survive. Worms eat their own weight in organic waste and soil and excrete their own weight in castings which makes compost and enriches the soil.



Earthworm © Wikimedia Commons/Dodo-Bird

Talking of nematodes brings me to my recent 'Eureka' moment. I've often wondered why French gardeners don't do more flower gardening. Their potagers are always impeccable so imagine what a flower garden would be like. Instead I often see a long row of Dahlias or Chrysanthemums amongst rows of vegetables. Eureka! Dahlias repel nematodes and Chrysanthemums repel Japanese beetles.

Take that a step further and swap things around a bit by putting vegetables in the flower garden - garlic planted amongst roses will deter aphids and tomato plants can protect roses from black spot. However, although growing French Marigolds amongst tomatoes will deter greenfly and black fly, growing tomatoes too close to your potatoes can make the potato plants more susceptible to potato blight. So 'you pays your money and you takes your chance' as the saying goes. Still thinking of tomatoes, apparently if you sprinkle baking soda on the soil around them not only will it discourage pests but the crop will be sweeter and less acidic. My favourite though is Fennel which should be in the vegetable garden but I always grow it in the flower bed. It is perennial with lovely feathery foliage, marvellous for flower displays, but best of all it deters aphids, slugs and snails - even if you don't like the taste it's worth growing.



French marigold © Wikimedia Commons/Fir0002

Sunny days, warmer temperatures, longer evenings, BBQ's and picnics - June is here, and so are the many tasks in the garden.

In the flower garden you can lift and divide snowdrops and bluebells once the leaves have gone yellow. The same for daffodils, and this is the time to give them a good feed to ensure more lovely flowers next Spring. Don't be too anxious to remove the leaves before they have completely died back otherwise your bulbs might go 'blind' and fail to flower next year. They need to use sunlight absorbed through the leaves (photosynthesis) to feed the bulb.

Water lawns in dry weather and feed with high nitrogen fertiliser for healthy green growth. It's tempting to use grass clippings as a mulch in the flower beds to prevent weed growth, but it is better to use woodchips because grass clippings can release heat as they decompose, which could damage plant roots and stems. Grass clippings also get very smelly as they decompose so put them on the compost heap - it will remind you to turn the compost heap at least once a month to keep it well aerated and help speed up the rotting process.

If you haven't already done so, support tall perennials to prevent wind damage. The longer you delay the more difficult the job will become because the plant will be bigger and surrounding plants will also be bushier, leaving you less access room.

Tie in new growth on climbers. Be vigilant because plants like honeysuckle and clematis will attach themselves to anything handy and can be very difficult to reposition.

Finish planting out summer bedding in the garden and in tubs. For very large tubs holding several plants it is a useful ploy to use a piece of hosepipe, long enough to stand upright in the soil in the centre of the tub. Make holes at intervals all along the pipe then poke it straight down into the soil. Water from the top and the liquid will then gradually seep out at different levels to reach roots all the way round the tub. Recycled plastic bottles are an alternative but can be a bit of an eyesore amongst beautiful summer flowers.



Fennel © Wikimedia Commons/4028mdk09