

Haddam Garden Club

Garden Blog Article

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My Garden Fortress

My first spring at Someday Pond, eight years ago already, was also my first attempt at vegetable gardening. Oh, what plans I had! I'd grow most of my own food, living off just-picked or home-canned fruits and vegetables. I'd have so much bounty I'd need a freezer. But my vegetable garden would be no merely practical space. It would be a charming potager, elegantly designed, just like the ones I'd admired in so many coffee table books. Symmetrical beds, lush flowers to attract the pollinators, decorative supports and trellises, maybe some statuary or a fountain just to add style.

I did notice that every old-world garden hid safely behind tall, solid brick walls. Of course I'd need to keep the deer out. My barrier is made of humble cedar poles and wire fencing, but I don't mind that. There's beauty in utility, and anyway it can be prettied up with sweet peas and flowering beans growing up the fence, plus several extremely amateurishly espaliered apple trees. I put an arbor at the gate; it too is only cedar, but my friend Malaine gave me rooted pieces of William Baffin roses to plant on either side, and the dark pink blossoms grace the entrance every June. A pretty geometric layout, with a flourish of strongly architectural yucca filamentosa at the corners, and I was ready to plant.

For a year or two all was well. Heirloom tomatoes, crisp bell peppers, some winter squash, and of course, more zucchini than I could possibly use. The fantasy was coming to life in my own back yard. Who says organic gardening is difficult?

By year three, though, the critters had found their way to my garden, and told all their friends. I swear, bugs have data sharing networks superior to anything Silicon Valley can dream up. First came the insects: red lily beetles chowing down on Asiatic lilies, cabbage moths on the brassicas. Most frustrating of all, squash vine borers took out my fancy blue squash plants. Adult females lay their eggs at the base of the squash vine, and newly hatched offspring bore into the center and eat their way up, pushing out their excreta (called 'frass') and growing into fat white larvae. Disgusting, and so disappointing, when you discover the strong healthy vine you admired yesterday is now lying shriveled and dying in its bed.

A year or two later, I realized that, among fur-bearing creatures, deer were the least of my worries. Chipmunks efficiently harvest strawberries just before the pink flushes red. Brazen squirrels scamper across my deck with anything small enough to fit into

their greedy mouths. A family of woodchucks treat the garden as their personal food bank. While they are voracious, they're also picky, and make a habit of taking a bite out of every tomato in the row before settling on their favorite. No blueberries, no raspberries, not a single apple. I wasn't growing for myself any more.

What to do? If one is committed, as I am, to avoiding pesticides, the only recourse is physical barriers. Which, I was surprised to learn, come in an almost inexhaustible range of sizes, shapes, and materials.

* Ultra-fine netting—fine enough to keep out the squash vine borers, I wonder? If it keeps out pests, it also bars pollinators, so I'd have to hand-pollinate the squash blossoms.

* Insect netting, bird netting, netting by the bolt, netting pre-built onto hoops, netting shaped on frames, complete with zippered entrances. Most of it is made of plastic, which I've been trying not to use. And how do I install bird netting over an espaliered tree?

* Hardware cloth, which, apparently, needs to be placed at least a foot below ground level, all around the perimeter, to discourage the woodchucks from tunneling under the fence. My digging muscles are sore just thinking about it. And won't that leave gaps at the gates?

* You can buy what look like upside-down trash cans made of wire mesh to put over young plants, but none of them look big enough to protect plants as they get big enough to produce harvestable crops.

If every plant is swathed in netting or barricaded by metal, the charming potager starts to look more like an armed camp. Looks like I'll have to trade my dream garden for the peace of mind that comes with knowing your food is pesticide-free.

Still, my barricades won't go up until next year. Except for a few carefully guarded tomatoes, this summer's harvest will be mostly flowers for a family wedding. Most of them, theoretically, don't need the same level of protection as the edibles. Still, hungry deer try everything, so I'm growing the flowers inside the fence, just in case. Let's hope that's enough.