



Planning--Your Garden--Makes Perfect

Get organized early this year by charting your garden plan now before spring. Check out our planning calendars, charts, checklist tips and more.

By Kelly Wood

Photo by Rhoda Peacher I am a list-maker—I admit it.

I get a little compulsive, sometimes having to make lists of my lists, just to keep myself straight. I like the look of a list—it stages what you want or need to do in a nice, tidy, easy-to-read way.

I really like to cross things off of lists as I complete them. I've been known to write something on my list after it's completed, just so I can have the satisfaction of crossing it off. (My husband caught me doing it the other day.) I get a nice sense of accomplishment seeing it at the end of a long, tiring day.

I use charts and lists for almost everything on my farm.

It saves my sanity, especially in the spring and early summer, when the timing of planting, hardening off, transplanting and protecting is of utmost importance.

They're also vital in autumn when I'm so preoccupied with harvest and preserving that it's easy to forget about planting for the cooler seasons.

If I had employees, I would start them off with a chart of what needs to be done and rely on that to be their manager for much of the time.

Photo by Rhoda Peacher

Phenological Signs Plant corn and beans when elm leaves are the size of a squirrel's ear, when oak leaves are the size of a mouse's ear, when apple blossoms begin to fall, or when dogwoods are in full bloom. Plant lettuce, spinach, peas, broccoli and cabbage when the lilacs show their first leaves or when daffodils begin to bloom. Plant tomatoes, early corn and peppers when dogwoods are in peak bloom or when daylilies start to bloom. Plant cucumbers and squash when lilac flowers fade. Plant potatoes when the first dandelion blooms. Plant beets and carrots when dandelions are blooming (good succession planting plan, too). Plant peas when the forsythia blooms.

Sources: The Old Farmer's Almanac, University of Wisconsin Extension

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These days, gardeners and farmers can choose from several options to help schedule the work and jobs that must be handled.

Whether you prefer computer programs or actual paper forms fastened to a clipboard, posted on a wall or slipped into your pocket, there are ways to organize your garden planning duties into a format that will work for you and, more importantly, get you into your garden faster.

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Phenological Signs

Years ago, before paper was easily obtained and computers were nonexistent, people used the signs of nature to let them know it was time to plant their annual edibles.

This is called phenological planning, and it was a mainstay of the annual Old Farmer's Almanac.



People sometimes chalk these up as “old wives tales,” such as, “When the white oak leaves are the size of a mouse’s ear, it’s time to plant corn.” (See “Phenological Signs” for more.)

However, I find some of them to be useful harbingers of what the weather is going to do. I remain convinced that the animals and plants can better sense natural timing than humans can, and it behooves us to take our cues from them.

I began to practice phenological planting several years ago—I have dogwood, forsythia, daffodils and lilacs scattered around to act as indicators. The dandelions are there, too, but not by choice.

Nature’s lunar planting method dictates that the moon’s gravitational pull has an effect on certain parts of a plant and can benefit its germination and growth.

I have a friend who religiously uses her “Planting by the Moon Calendar.” It tells what days are best for seeding, direct planting or transplanting. It also reassures her that there are certain days that aren’t optimal, thus assuaging her guilt about not doing any garden work.

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Computer Programs

With so many programs for our computers these days, any software store near you should carry garden-planning software.

I have an older program called Sprout, which allows me to make a view of my garden and then “plant” it on screen. When it’s all planted, you can print reports, such as a shopping list of seed quantities to take along to the nursery or a calendar of when to plant and when to expect harvest, all based on your planting plan.

This year, I shared in a computer reminder system.

A friend put all the dates that she had for planting certain crops into a basic computer calendar program. She asked several other gardeners to write her for one year with the dates that they planted their crops, and she recorded those, too. The calendar program pops up a reminder when certain things need to be done—you can even program it to send you an e-mail alert. This is a great method for people who use their computers daily.

Journals and Diaries

I’m adept at keeping records of some things but fall short on details of others.

I operate best with boxes that can be filled in with concrete values. For those of the same mind, A Gardener’s Journal published by Lee Valley is great—a 10-year perpetual diary, it provides areas to record planting details such as temperatures and weather, and there are five or six lines to jot other details.

You’re able to look back easily over the previous years and see what was happening on your farm at that same time.

When you use garden journals, it’s great to record mundane details.

I used it to record when certain trees began to bloom over the last few years, helping me coordinate phenological planning.

By recording things that are otherwise commonplace, you might be giving yourself clues down the road for patterns you didn’t know existed. Some of those details might not be as dull as you think at the time—it’s fun to look back and read about what was going on in our lives back then.

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Specialty Charts

I made a special magnetic chart to do my crop rotations—I got a piece of furnace sheet metal at the hardware store and sheet magnet from TAP Plastics.

I spend several days each summer with a pile of books on companion planting, germination techniques, cover cropping and my magnetic board, moving things around, referring to past plans and looking up good companions and things to avoid combining.



I chart it all out on the board, and then, when I'm sure, I write it (in pencil) on a paper sheet that has a schematic of my garden on it.

An elaborate poster I got for Christmas details all the information you'd want to know about growing annual produce in one big picture. It comes laminated, and I put grommets at each corner so I can move it seasonally from my plant-room wall in the winter and spring to the wall of my shed in the summer and fall.

Homemade Charts

The sheer volume of daily details can make work on a farm overwhelming. I often find myself en route to one task getting waylaid by another, completely forgetting what I was doing in the first place, only to come upon the tools, detritus and half-done job hours later. I need specific charts and lists to keep my bearings.

I use Microsoft Excel to make my own charts and put them into a nice, tidy form, including columns for the date and crops. I assign geometric columns and rows for whatever data I think I'll need.

On my small farm: I keep count of how many eggs I'm getting daily and how many dozens I sell.

Costs of feed have gone up dramatically, and this helps me determine if the girls are paying for their room and board.

When I milk the goats, I keep track of the quantity from each milking; this can help predict when the goats are in heat or feeling sick.

Whenever I pick produce, I mark it on my homemade chart with the date, variety and weight. I've often gone back to those records to see when I got my first harvest of certain crops or when customers can expect to see certain things for sale based on historical precedent.

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My Seed Planting Charts

I recently composed a chart for seed planting that has spaces for date, type of seed, approximate amount, bed they were planted in, spacing if necessary, and a long line for "germination or emergence details." I store the chart on the refrigerator door where I keep my seeds.

Every time I put away a seed packet, I see the chart and immediately write down the details before I forget. I like to have clipboard charts in my garden shed to fill in as I go.

I have two different "what-to-plant-when" charts. They're laminated, and I and keep them near the garden: 1) by two-week increments and 2) a general guide for each month.

The lamination protects them and can be written on with a wax pencil. Anything that will be changed or replaced, like the paper copy of my magnetic board plan, gets a sheet protector with the open side down. That way I can clip it on my fence for reference, keeping out the rain, but still make changes and amendments as the season progresses.

Keep Paper and Pencil Handy

If I don't have my individual charts with me, I find it helps to have a piece of paper and pencil.

At my best, I carry a small tablet with me in my overalls or alongside my tools in my wheelbarrow. Sometimes I'll scribble something on a receipt I find in my pocket. This is a problem when I open the dryer and find shards of a list mixed in the lint trap. I worry for days about what I had written and am now forgetting.

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Guidelines for Chart Use

1) Always write in pencil. It doesn't run in the rain, and it can be erased; not that it would have to be—some facts can't be changed.

It was indeed tomatoes that I picked, but as soon as I've written down that I got 23 pounds of Lemon Boy, I can be assured that it either wasn't Lemon Boy or that my husband picked four additional pounds and took them to the kitchen for



dinner.

It's no big deal to cross out details, but when it comes to the end of the year and I'm trying to tally up how many pounds were yielded for the amount of seed I planted, I'm happy to have it easily readable.

2) Keep the chart visible in your work area. If you put it in a folder or tuck it into a drawer or shelf, it probably won't be used. I even attach a pencil on a string to some charts so it's there when I need to make notes.

3) Check your charts often, or make using them a part of your routine. If a chart tells you when to plant seeds in the spring and you only look at it every three or four weeks, you'll miss some important dates. If it's a chart that needs to be filled in for your records, make sure using it is part of the routine. I bring out my weight chart every time I bring out my scale.

4) Make the records interesting—make them appeal to you so you'll want to use them. Print them on colored paper or use a nice clipboard. Draw on them with garden themes or print graphic clip art. Color them in or write with brightly colored pens.

I made a notebook with tabs for each crop I grow. Instead of writing the name, I drew a tiny picture of the vegetable itself. If you don't like the appearance of the chart, you're not going to use it. The important thing is to find the method that works for you.

All of this record keeping serves to help me as a small business owner outside of a typical office environment.

If it were needed, I have an elaborate paper trail for all of what I've done for the last seven years. In any business setting, that can be invaluable; although, I sometimes feel a little inundated with charts and clipboards and get tired of carrying a constant list.

I wish I had the brain that my husband has, being able to remember things reliably and readily, but I'm easily distracted, and there are so many details on a farm, I can't keep them all straight without my reference materials.

I like getting e-mail planting updates; they bring my garden work to the forefront of my mind—until I get away from the computer, go downstairs and see the dishes that still need to be cleaned up—and find my packet of seeds from last week on my desk, and put it by the back door where my garden clogs live.

Maybe I'll just start a list of what needs to be planted. I'll go get paper from my desk drawer—oh, there's that box of stuff that needs to go to the basement. And while I'm down there I'll check the laundry. I think I heard the washer beeping ...

About the Author: Kelly Wood compulsively checks calendars and fills in homemade charts for her hobby farm in Portland, Ore.

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