



GROWPERMA · A 20-PAGE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

The 7-Layer Backyard

How to build a garden that works like a forest

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Twenty pages. One weekend. A working plan.

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FROM PETER

Welcome to the guide I wish someone had handed me.

For twenty years I gardened the way everyone gardens. I dug. I weeded. I bought bags of mulch I dragged across a driveway in July. I watered tomatoes that died anyway. Every August I told myself the same lie: next year I will be more organised. I was tired. The garden was tired. And the worst part was that I was doing everything the books told me to do.

Then I read a passage in *Edible Forest Gardens* about a food forest in Massachusetts that had been left alone for ten years. No weeding. No watering. No fertiliser. And it was producing more food than the tilled bed next to it. I read it three times, then I went outside and looked at my own garden, every straight row, every drooping tomato, and I understood: I was not gardening with nature. I was fighting it. Every single Saturday for twenty years.

I read 17 books in the next four months. Mollison. Götsch. Shepard. Hemenway. They all said the same thing the conventional books had been hiding from me: **the most productive gardens in the world are the ones the gardener barely touches.** That was the week I started GrowPerma.

This guide is the 20-page version of what I wish someone had handed me at the start. Sixteen pages of practical content. Two printable worksheets. A year-by-month food-forest calendar. A field guide to the five pests you will meet first. Read it once on a Saturday morning. Use it the same afternoon.

Peter

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS ABOUT

Backyard food forests for people who do not have a forest.

You can build a garden that works like a forest on a quarter-acre lot. You can build one on a tenth-acre lot. You can build a tiny one on a patio with five containers. The mechanism is the same in every case. You stack plants in layers, you let the system feed itself, and you stop doing the things you were taught to do.

The counterintuitive truth

Most gardening advice tells you that effort and yield go up together. Weed more, water more, fertilise more, harvest more. This stops being true past the third month of any well-designed garden. Every hour you spend weeding past month three is the system telling you it is broken.

The most productive gardens in the world, measured in calories per square foot, are not the most worked. They are the most designed.

What this guide is not

This is not a permaculture certificate course. It will not list the 12 principles in their original Mollison wording (although [page 6](#) shows them in plain English), and it will not ask you to memorise a single Latin name. Principles are only mentioned when they explain something you can act on this weekend.

Who this guide is for

You have a yard somewhere between 200 and 10,000 square feet. You have grown a tomato or two. You have read the words "permaculture" or "food forest" and felt curious, but also that they were written for people with ten acres and a PhD. They were not.

THE THREE RULES

Earth care. People care. Fair share.

Three short rules that constrain every permaculture decision. Bill Mollison and David Holmgren wrote them in 1978 as a deliberate alternative to "produce more". They look soft until you try to violate them on purpose.

1. Earth Care

Treat the soil, water, plants, and animals as if they were the living systems they are. Do not poison them. Do not extract from them faster than they can regenerate. The default position is restraint.

In practice: never bare soil for long. Never apply something that does not break down. Plant more than you take.

2. People Care

Build systems that meet human needs sustainably, including your own. A garden that exhausts you in year two is failing the people-care test, even if the soil is improving.

In practice: design for less work over time, not more. Mulch heavier. Plant perennials. Stop fighting the system.

3. Fair Share

Take only what you need. Return the surplus to the system, to other people, or to the next generation. The garden produces more when you give some away.

In practice: share seeds, share cuttings, share what you learned. Do not hoard the harvest.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Permaculture Ethics: Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share

HOLMGREN'S TWELVE

The 12 principles, in plain English.

Use them as a checklist when you are about to make a decision and not sure. Each one is a one-sentence test.

01 Observe and interact

Watch before you act. The yard knows.

02 Catch and store energy

Rainwater, sunlight, perennials, knowledge.

03 Obtain a yield

The system must feed someone, including you.

04 Self-regulate, accept feedback

When the garden says it is broken, listen.

05 Use renewable resources

Wood, manure, seed, neighborly help.

06 Produce no waste

Compost it, share it, or design it out.

07 Design from patterns to details

Big picture first. Plant species second.

08 Integrate, do not segregate

The apple tree is also wildlife habitat.

09 Use small, slow solutions

Year one is small. Year five is bigger.

10 Use and value diversity

Five different berries beats one big patch.

11 Use edges, value the marginal

The fence line, the path edge, the pond bank.

12 Respond to change creatively

Drought, frost, new neighbours. Adapt.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

12 Permaculture Principles Explained with Garden Examples

THE MECHANISM

A forest is a stack, not a row.

Seven layers, all producing at different heights, all feeding the same soil, all sheltering each other from extremes. Your backyard forest is the same idea at smaller scale.

- 1. Canopy (20 to 40 feet)**
The biggest tree on your lot. Walnut, chestnut, full-size apple, oak. Often the only tree that already exists when you start. Do not cut it down. Plan around it.
- 2. Sub-canopy (10 to 20 feet)**
Smaller fruit and nut trees. Semi-dwarf apple, pear, plum, mulberry, hazelnut. Most of your annual fruit yield lives here.
- 3. Shrub (3 to 10 feet)**
Berry-producing bushes. Blueberry, currant, gooseberry, elderberry, raspberry. Year-three productivity is enormous.
- 4. Herbaceous (1 to 3 feet)**
Perennial herbs, vegetables, flowers that come back. Comfrey, rhubarb, lovage, sorrel, bee balm. Fertilises everything above it.
- 5. Ground cover (under 1 foot)**
Living mulch. Strawberry, creeping thyme, white clover, sweet woodruff. Smothers weeds without effort.
- 6. Root (underground)**
Plants that produce in the soil. Garlic, walking onion, daikon, Jerusalem artichoke. Free yield in dead space.
- 7. Vine (climbs through everything)**
Hardy kiwi, grape, ground-nut, climbing beans. Wraps the system together vertically.

A real backyard food forest does not need all seven layers in year one. Most start with three or four and add the rest over the first five years. [Page 15](#) gives you three starter guilds you can plant this Saturday.

MISTAKE #1 · COST ME A YEAR

Buying ten varieties of fruit tree before mapping zones. Half died because I planted them too far from the hose in Zone 4 thinking I would carry water out. I did not. Map first ([page 14](#)). Then plant.

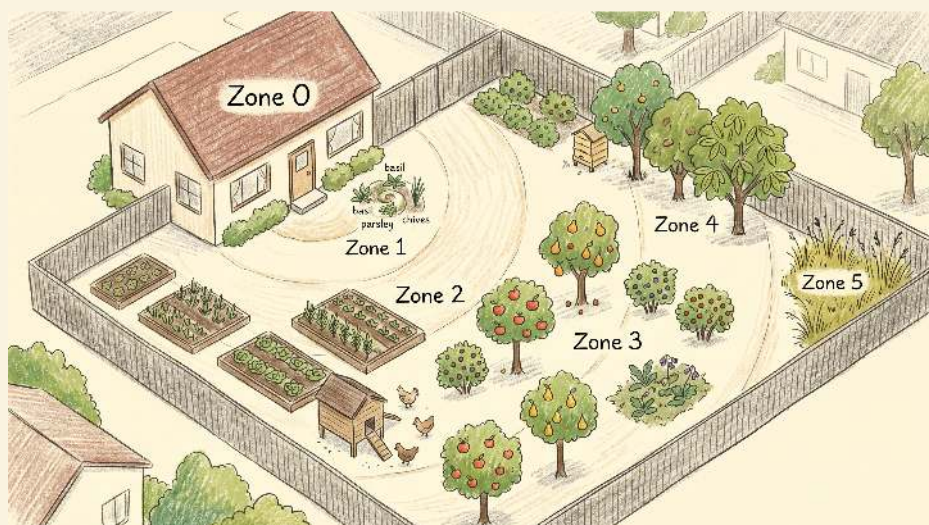
READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

The 7 Layers of a Food Forest: Understanding Vertical Structure

ORGANISING THE FOREST IN SPACE

Plant what needs you close to where you walk.

Permaculture organises your yard by how often you visit each part. The closer something needs you, the closer it lives to your back door.



- 0 The house.**
Where you live, eat, and store food.
- 1 Inches from the back door.**
Daily-use herbs, salad greens, compost crock.
- 2 A short walk.**
Annual vegetables, chicken run, rainwater barrel. Daily.
- 3 The food forest proper.**
Fruit trees, berries, perennials. Weekly.
- 4 The semi-wild edge.**
Nut trees, foraging plants. Monthly or seasonally.
- 5 Unmanaged.**
The corner you leave for wildlife. Most suburban yards skip it.

MISTAKE #2 · COST ME A YEAR

Putting Zone 1 plants in Zone 3 locations. Basil six feet from the back door dies because you forget to water it. The plant is the same. The placement is the design decision.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Permaculture Zones Explained: From Your Doorstep to the Wild

READING YOUR SITE

Four observations before you spend a dollar.

Spend a Saturday observing what your yard tells you. These four observations are the difference between a garden that works in year three and a garden that fights you for ten.

1. SUN

Stand outside at 10 am, noon, and 4 pm on a clear day. Mark full sun (6+ hrs), partial (3 to 6), shade (under 3). Fruit trees need 6+.

2. WATER

Where does water collect? Where does it run off? Collection points become swales ([page 10](#)).

3. WIND

Which direction does the cold winter wind hit from? Plant an evergreen windbreak on that side.

4. SOIL

Dig three one-foot holes. Squeeze a handful: ribbon longer than an inch is clay. Test fully on [page 12](#).

USDA ZONE QUICK-REFERENCE · WHAT RELIABLY THRIVES IN YOUR CLIMATE

| ZONE | FRUIT TREES THAT THRIVE | BEST BERRIES | PERENNIAL VEGETABLES |
|------|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| 4 | Honeycrisp apple, sour cherry, hardy plum | Currant, gooseberry, raspberry, haskap | Asparagus, rhubarb |
| 5 | Apple, pear, plum, sour cherry, hazelnut | Blueberry, raspberry, currant | Asparagus, rhubarb, lovage |
| 6 | Apple, pear, peach, plum, mulberry | Blueberry, raspberry, blackberry | Asparagus, sorrel, sea kale |
| 7 | Peach, fig, persimmon, apple, pawpaw | Blueberry, fig, blackberry | Artichoke, asparagus, sorrel |
| 8 | Fig, persimmon, pomegranate, satsuma | Blueberry, fig, blackberry, mulberry | Artichoke, sea kale, malabar spinach |
| 9 | Citrus, avocado, loquat, fig, mango (south) | Pineapple guava, mulberry, blackberry | Artichoke, malabar spinach, chaya |

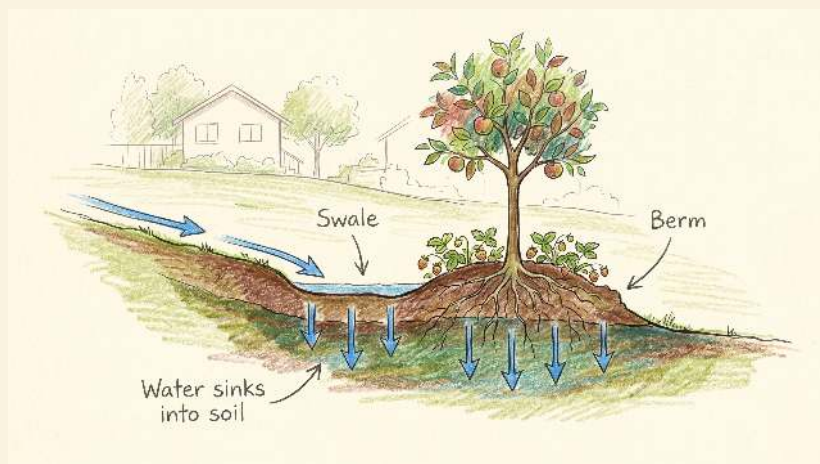
MISTAKE #3 · COST ME A YEAR

Trusting the USDA zone more than my actual last-frost date. A late-April frost killed an entire year of apple blossom. Look up your county's average last frost. It matters more than the zone map.

WATER HARVESTING

A quarter acre catches 60,000 gallons a year.

Most of it runs off into the storm drain and is gone. Permaculture asks: what if it stayed?



The swale, a level ditch on contour

A swale is a shallow, level trench dug along the contour of your slope. Soil from the trench piles up on the downhill side as a berm. Rain that lands above the swale slows down, fills the trench, and soaks into the soil instead of running off. Plant fruit trees and berry bushes on the berm. They drink the water you just captured.

Three places to catch water in a suburban yard

1 Downspout to rain barrel.

Cheapest. A 55-gallon barrel fills from a typical downspout in 15 minutes of rain.

2 Downspout to swale.

Bigger storage than a barrel. The yard becomes the cistern.

3 Rain garden.

A low planted depression that holds runoff for a few hours. Plant with native sedges, irises, swamp milkweed.

The 60-minute test: pour a 5-gallon bucket on the bare spot where you think a rain garden could go. Under 60 minutes to soak in is good. Over 4 hours, sheet-mulch first ([page 13](#)).

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Swales and Berms: Harvest Rainwater With Earthworks

THE SHORTCUT

Feed the soil, not the plants.

Conventional advice says to feed your plants. Buy NPK fertiliser. Apply per label. Permaculture says to feed your soil. Compost, mulch, mulch some more, and leave it alone.

A soil rich in life feeds plants in a way no bag of fertiliser can match. A teaspoon of healthy forest soil contains billions of bacteria, miles of fungal threads, and thousands of microscopic predators that move nutrients into plant roots in real time. You cannot replicate that with a fertiliser bag. You can only protect it.

Three things that feed soil life

- ↑ **Carbon.**
Wood chips, straw, leaves, shredded cardboard. Spread 3 to 4 inches thick on top and leave it.
- ↑ **Compost.**
Half-finished homemade compost is better than perfectly finished compost. Microbes still alive. An inch on top of the mulch twice a year.
- ↑ **Plants.**
Living roots in the soil all year keep the food web active. Bare dirt is a wound.

Three things that destroy soil life

- ↓ **Rototilling.**
Slices fungal threads, scatters bacterial colonies. Skip it forever.
- ↓ **Synthetic fertiliser.**
High-salt formulas dehydrate microbes and shift the bacterial-to-fungal ratio away from what perennials need.
- ↓ **Bare ground.**
Sun on bare soil oxidises organic matter and bakes the surface. Cover it or plant it.

MISTAKE #4 · COST ME A YEAR

Treating "no weeding" as "no observation". The first year of a food forest looks broken because perennials grow slowly. I stopped looking. By August, deer had stripped the apple sapling I never noticed they had found. Walk it every Saturday anyway.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Soil Health: How to Build Living Soil for a Thriving Garden

FOUR DIY SOIL TESTS

You do not need a lab.

You need a Mason jar, a clear cup, a pH test kit (about \$8), and one hour.



1. THE RIBBON TEST · 1 MINUTE, FREE

Wet a handful of soil. Squeeze it between thumb and forefinger to form a flat ribbon. No ribbon = sandy. Less than 1 inch = sandy loam. 1 to 2 inches = silt loam (the goldilocks). 2+ inches = clay loam or heavy clay.

2. THE JAR TEST · 24 HOURS, FREE

Fill a Mason jar 1/3 with soil, top off with water, add a teaspoon of dish soap, shake, let sit overnight. Layers settle out (see illustration). Healthy garden soil is roughly 40% sand, 40% silt, 20% clay.

3. THE INFILTRATION TEST · 30 MIN, FREE

Dig a 1-foot deep hole, fill with water, let it drain, fill it again. Time the second fill. 1 inch per hour = healthy. Under 0.5 in/hr = compacted, sheet-mulch first. Over 4 in/hr = sandy, add compost.

4. THE PH TEST · 5 MIN, \$8

Buy a basic pH test kit from any garden centre. Most edibles like 6.0 to 7.0. Blueberries want 4.5 to 5.5 (acidic). Test three spots, average.

Test once in early spring, once mid-season. Compare year over year to watch soil improving. That is the gardener's only meaningful KPI.

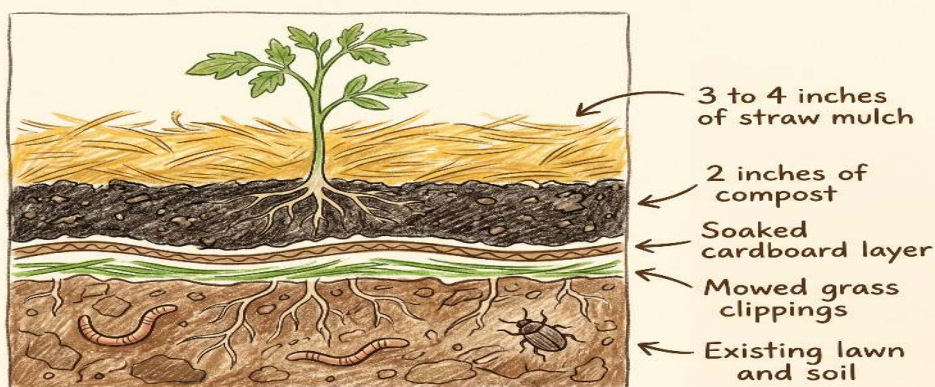
READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Clay Soil Improvement: Turn Heavy Soil Into Garden Gold

PRINTABLE · SHEET-MULCHING CHECKLIST

Turn lawn into a planting bed without rototilling.

Works on grass, clay, weeds, and compacted suburban yards. Use in fall for spring planting, or now for late-summer planting.



MATERIALS PER 100 SQUARE FEET

- 4 to 6 large cardboard boxes, broken flat, tape removed
- 6 to 8 wheelbarrows of partially-finished compost or aged manure
- 2 to 3 cubic yards of straw, wood chips, or shredded leaves
- Garden hose with sprayer nozzle; spade for edging

STEPS

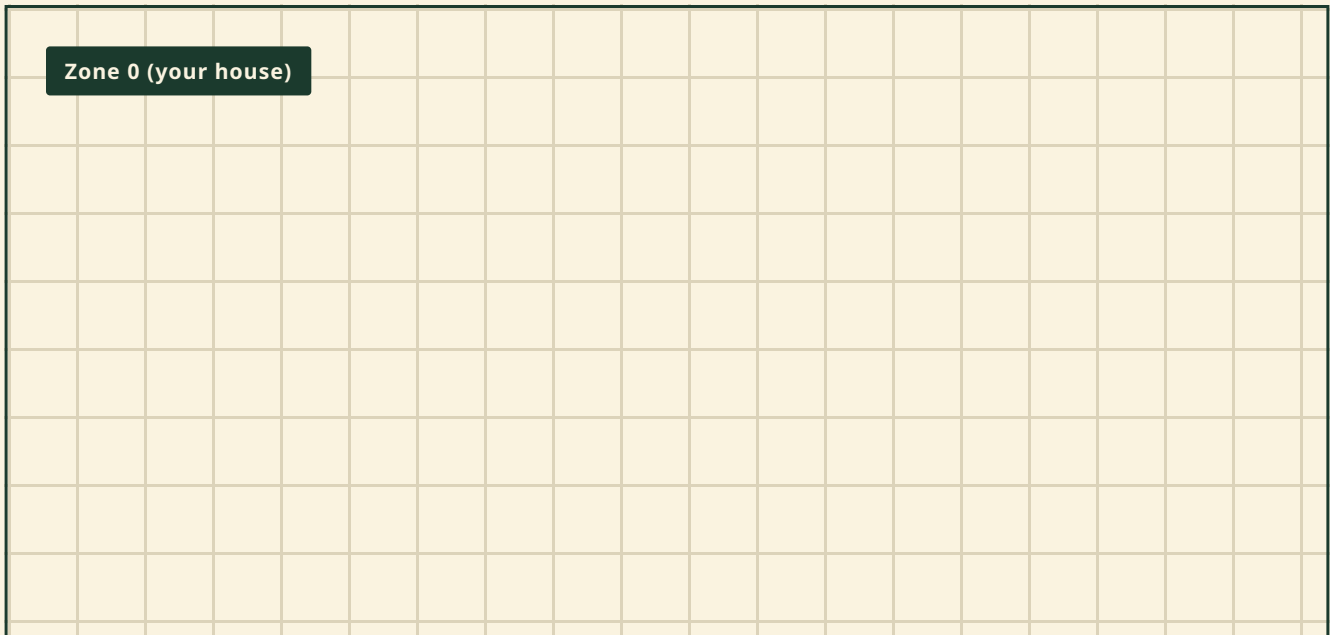
- 1 Mow the existing lawn or weeds as short as possible. Leave the clippings.
- 2 Soak the area with the hose for 5 to 10 minutes. Wet ground builds fungi faster.
- 3 Lay cardboard flat across the entire area. Overlap edges by 4 inches. No gaps.
- 4 Soak the cardboard until it is dark and floppy.
- 5 Spread 2 inches of compost or aged manure over the cardboard.
- 6 Add 3 to 4 inches of straw, wood chips, or shredded leaves on top.
- 7 Soak the whole stack again. Wait 6 weeks for spring, 4 weeks for warm-weather planting.

One common mistake: skipping the soaking. Dry cardboard repels water and goes mouldy instead of decomposing. Wet it.

PRINTABLE · ZONE-PLANNING WORKSHEET

Map your yard. Then plant it.

Print this page. Sketch your yard on the grid below. Mark zones 0 to 5 as they exist or as you plan them. Use the legend at the bottom.



5-STEP PROCESS

- 1 Mark your house in the upper-left. Label it Zone 0.
- 2 Walk your yard with this page on a clipboard. Ask: how often will I be here?
- 3 Mark each area with the right zone number.
- 4 Note obstacles: existing trees, utilities (call 811), septic, slope.
- 5 Match plants to zones using the legend.

LEGEND

- Zone 1** Basil, parsley, chives, thyme, salad greens, compost bin.
- Zone 2** Annual vegetables, asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries, chickens.
- Zone 3** Apple, pear, plum, mulberry, hazelnut, berries, comfrey.
- Zone 4** Nut trees, timber, foraging plants, beehives.
- Zone 5** No plants. Whatever moves in on its own.

NOTES

THREE GUILDS YOU CAN PLANT THIS WEEKEND

Pick one. Plant it Saturday.

A guild is a small group of plants that support each other. The Three Sisters (corn, beans, squash) is the classic example. The food forest is just guilds at every scale.

1. The apple guild

Zone 3 · full sun · about 10 by 10 feet

The classic backyard food forest in miniature. One semi-dwarf apple at the centre, surrounded by plants that feed it, defend it, and attract its pollinators.

- 1 semi-dwarf apple tree (centre)
- 2 comfrey plants at the drip line
- 1 yarrow patch, attracts beneficial insects
- 3 chive clumps, deters apple pests
- White clover under the canopy, fixes nitrogen
- Daffodils around the trunk, deters rodents

YEAR-1 BUDGET

| | |
|-------------------------|---------|
| Bareroot apple tree | \$35-65 |
| 2 comfrey root cuttings | \$10-18 |
| Compost + mulch | \$20-40 |
| Stake + soft tie | \$8-15 |
| Deer wrap (year 1) | \$10-18 |

Year-1 total **\$83-156**

Year one: tree plus comfrey only. Add the rest year two (\$30 to \$50).

MISTAKE #5 · COST ME A YEAR

Planting comfrey three feet from the patio. Its roots run six feet and resprout from any fragment you try to dig up. Site comfrey 6+ feet from anything you care about.

2. The pollinator guild

Zone 2 · full or partial sun · about 6 by 6 feet

Attracts bees, butterflies, and predatory wasps to your vegetable beds. If you grow squash, cucumbers, or tomatoes, plant this within 30 feet of them.

- Borage, the biggest bee magnet you can plant · Bee balm, attracts hummingbirds · Lavender, drought-tolerant, summer-long bloom · Coneflower, autumn bloom · A single milkweed plant, monarch larval host

3. The Three Sisters bed

Zone 2 · full sun · about 4 by 4 feet

The oldest documented companion guild in North America. Beans climb the corn. Squash shades the soil. Plant in late May after frost. Soak corn seeds overnight. Sow beans 10 days after the corn sprouts so the corn has a head start.

COMPANION PLANTING CHEAT SHEET

Who their best neighbours are.

The most common backyard vegetables, paired with their strongest companions and the ones to keep apart. Cribbed from the full GrowPerma chart, condensed to one printable page.

BACKYARD COMPANION-PLANTING STARTER TABLE

| VEGETABLE | BEST COMPANIONS | AVOID NEARBY |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Tomato | Basil, carrots, marigold, parsley | Brassicas, fennel, corn |
| Pepper | Basil, onion, spinach, carrots | Beans, brassicas |
| Carrot | Tomato, leek, rosemary, sage | Dill, parsnip |
| Lettuce | Carrot, radish, strawberry, chives | Brassicas (close planting) |
| Cucumber | Beans, corn, dill, nasturtium | Sage, melons |
| Squash, pumpkin | Corn, beans, borage, marigold | Potato |
| Pole beans | Corn, cucumber, lettuce, radish | Onion family, beet |
| Onion, garlic | Tomato, brassicas, beet, carrot | All legumes, asparagus |
| Brassicas (kale, cabbage) | Beet, celery, onion, dill | Tomato, pole bean, strawberry |
| Strawberry | Onion, lettuce, spinach, thyme | Brassicas |
| Corn | Beans, squash, melons, sunflower | Tomato |
| Potato | Beans, corn, horseradish, marigold | Tomato, squash, sunflower |

The one rule that matters most: diversity beats every specific pairing. A patch with 6 species rarely has serious pest pressure. A patch with one species is a buffet. When in doubt, add another plant.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

The Complete Companion Planting Chart

A YEAR IN THE FOOD FOREST

One month at a time.

Zone 6 baseline. Shift earlier for warmer zones, later for colder.

MONTH-BY-MONTH FOOD-FOREST CALENDAR

| MONTH | OBSERVE | DO |
|-------|-------------------------|---|
| JAN | Snow weight on branches | Prune dormant fruit trees, plan order list |
| FEB | Buds beginning to swell | Order bareroot trees, finalise zone map |
| MAR | Last frost approaching | Plant peas, garlic, onions; uncover sheet-mulched beds |
| APR | First blossoms | Plant bareroot trees, divide comfrey, sow lettuce |
| MAY | Last frost passed | Direct-sow corn, beans, squash; plant tomatoes after night temps stable |
| JUN | Heaviest growth | Mulch heavily, train climbing beans, second sowing of lettuce |
| JUL | Drought risk | Deep watering once a week. Never lightly daily |
| AUG | First harvests | Pick daily. Share surplus. Save seed from open-pollinated favourites |
| SEP | Cool nights | Plant fall garlic, sow cover crops, start sheet mulch for next year |
| OCT | Leaves drop | Collect leaves for mulch, plant fall bulbs (daffodils against rodents) |
| NOV | First hard frost | Wrap young tree trunks, finish sheet mulching, mulch garlic 4 inches deep |
| DEC | Rest | Read. Catalogue. Order seed catalogues. Compost the year's notes |

The principle that governs the year: Year 1 is for observing and sheet-mulching. Year 2 is for planting trees. Year 3 is the first real yield. Year 5 is when the system starts running itself.

SPRING

Spring Companion Planting

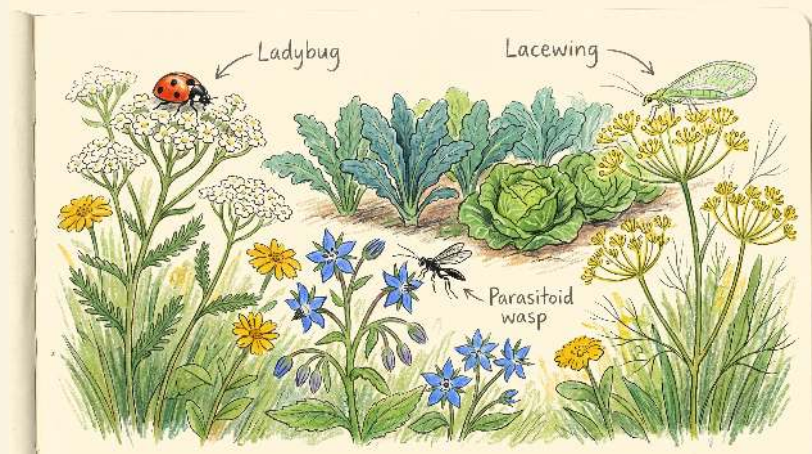
FALL

Fall Companion Planting

THE PESTS YOU WILL MEET FIRST

You do not have a pest problem.

You have a predator shortage. Fix the predator habitat, the pests fix themselves.



Aphids

What eats them: ladybug larvae, lacewings, parasitoid wasps.

Plant for the predators: dill, fennel, yarrow, alyssum.

Cabbage worms

What eats them: parasitoid wasps, ground beetles, songbirds.

Plant for the predators: dill, cilantro flower, native flowering shrubs. Row cover from transplant until flower.

Japanese beetles

What eats them: ducks, guinea fowl, starlings.

Plant for the predators: tachinid-fly hosts (parsley flower, cosmos). Knock beetles into soapy water at 7 am when they are slow.

Slugs and snails

What eats them: ground beetles, toads, garter snakes, ducks.

Plant for the predators: low ground cover (gives toads a daytime home). Beer trap, copper tape, headlamp at night.

Deer

What eats them: nothing. Manage instead.

Defence: 8-foot fence, or double 4-foot fence (cheaper), or strong-smelling perimeter plants (daffodil, garlic, lavender, rosemary). Wrap young apple trunks against winter rubbing.

READ DEEPER ON GROWPERMA

Integrated Pest Management for Home Gardens

WHAT TO READ NEXT

Eight articles. Five books. One spring.

Read these over the next month and you will know more about practical permaculture than 95% of gardeners who have never opened a Mollison book.

EIGHT GROWPERMA ARTICLES

- 01 **What Is Permaculture? A Practical Guide for Gardeners**
- 02 **12 Permaculture Principles Explained with Garden Examples**
- 03 **The Complete Companion Planting Chart**
- 04 **Soil Health: How to Build Living Soil**
- 05 **Composting for Beginners: The Complete Guide**
- 06 **The 7 Layers of a Food Forest**
- 07 **Food Forest Plants by Layer and Climate**
- 08 **From Lawn to Food Forest: Design**

All eight free. No email required. The full curated path lives at growperma.com/blog/start-here.

PETER'S BOOKSHELF

Gaia's Garden

Toby Hemenway

START AT CHAPTER 4

The best-selling permaculture book in the world. Written for backyards, not farms.

The Permaculture Handbook

Peter Bane

START AT CHAPTER 6

The most practical follow-on to Hemenway, written for North American suburban lots.

Edible Forest Gardens Vol. 1

Jackie & Toensmeier

START AT CHAPTER 1

The book that made me start GrowPerma. Read the Massachusetts forest passage.

Restoration Agriculture

Mark Shepard

START AT CHAPTER 3

Proves at 100+ acres that perennial agriculture out-yields industrial corn.

Teaming with Microbes

Jeff Lowenfels

START AT CHAPTER 4

The soil-food-web microbiology behind "feed the soil, not the plants".

ALL FREE. NO EMAIL REQUIRED. JUST READ.

growperma.com/blog/start-here

GrowPerma

Gardens That Work Like Forests.

About the author

Peter Vogel writes GrowPerma. He has been chasing the food-forest model since reading Edible Forest Gardens, and the site exists for the gardener he was twenty years ago: working too hard, getting too little, suspecting there had to be a smarter way.

GrowPerma is permaculture for people who do not have a permaculture certificate or a ten-acre homestead. Just a yard, a Saturday, and curiosity.

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