



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## Square Foot Gardening: The Whys and Hows (March 20, 2021))

by Kate Mackey, UCCE Master Gardener

First, WHY try a Square Food Garden?

With spring around the corner, most gardeners start to think of a vegetable garden, maybe a few marigolds and nasturtiums thrown in for color and pest control. The thought of fresh vegetables on the table and kudos from neighbors when you bring them your extra vine-ripened tomatoes is a pleasant daydream. Unfortunately, gardens are also time-consuming and require work to prepare the soil properly, plant, thin, weed, water, and otherwise care for your chlorophyllic children.

That is why in the early 70's, a gentleman by the name of Mel Bartholomew began thinking about a different way of gardening. He had started a community garden with his neighbors and after an initial thrust of enthusiasm, he observed that by the end of the summer, after bumper crops of some plants like zucchinis and tomatoes, the community garden was an overgrown mess. With that observation, Bartholomew began a search for answers. His research and observations became the concept called Square Foot Gardening.

Bartholomew realized an important concept that changed his perception of the way home gardens should be done. His observation was that home gardens for the most part are not farms. Farmers now rely on large production methods, products, and equipment because they must maximize their yield. Home gardens do not have to do this and the methods don't translate well from large to small. Even the use of raised beds in early use was still geared toward large production.

Bartholomew, in his book and later on his website, *Squarefootgardening.org*, introduced the concept of squares instead of rows. He also urged the use of raised beds for several excellent reasons. First, they make your garden easier to use. Bending and reaching are great for dancers and gymnasts, but most gardeners would be very happy to have their work require less strain on knees and back. A bed constructed anywhere from 6 inches off the ground to waist high does wonders to relieve physical stress. The added bonus is being able to create a soil substrate that is already free of weeds, properly aerated, and ready to use with a home-made or purchased soil mixture that is the proper pH and ratio of organic and inorganic matter. You can also put down wire fencing underneath to keep out the dreaded gophers.



Bartholomew's second "ah-ha" was the concept of single seed sowing rather than casting out gobs of seeds down a row, only to have to thin the little enthusiastic starters when they burst forth. Depending on the plants you choose, use only one to two seeds per planting. The number of sowing per square foot will depend on the type of plant. Tomatoes need a big area; radishes, not so much--but I am getting ahead here.

## Second: HOW to build a Square Food Garden

First, unless you are really a die-hard vegetable enthusiast with plenty of time, money and room, start small. A four foot by four foot garden will have 16 squares for planting. Each square will be easy to reach making planting, weeding, watering and staking much simpler. Sixteen squares is quite manageable and you will be amazed to find out how much you can get out of that small space: several types of lettuce and carrots, radishes, beets, cauliflower and more. As Bartholomew says in his book, "not bad for 2 months and 16 square feet."

Choosing a site for your garden is important and depends on what you are going to plant. Look for an area that gets **at least** four hours of full sun a day. Beets, onions, lettuce and carrots have a requirement of four to six hours of sun, but plants like tomatoes, beans, corn and broccoli need six hours or more of sun per day. Think about keeping the garden close to the house so that caring for it and harvesting is easy.

There are many types of materials and methods of making a raised bed, so I will not go into the details, but once you have your container made, you can purchase soil or make your own with the formula that Bartholomew recommends on his website.

The choice of what to grow is up to the gardener. Choose plants that require the same amount water so that you don't have to water some squares and not others. Also consider the size of the plant. Large plants that need staking like tomatoes or cucumbers should be planted either on the end of the planter, or in the center with smaller plants around. Also consider putting in some marigolds for pest control and color.

Once you have chosen your site and built your raised garden, research what you want to grow. The type of plant will dictate the number of seeds you can grow in one square. Tomatoes or cucumbers will require the whole square whereas radishes or carrots can be planted with up to sixteen plants per square.

The square foot garden is a great way to start your gardening experience. Once you have made the initial investment, the tools are minimal; gloves, a trowel for digging, a hose for watering, a good pruner, string or stakes for the larger plants. The work is easy and rewarding. Give it a try!

For planting guides on square foot gardens, please look at our Vegetable Gardens resource page [https://ucanr.edu/sites/UC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/Local\\_Gardening\\_Articles\\_-\\_Info/Vegetable\\_Gardening/](https://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/Local_Gardening_Articles_-_Info/Vegetable_Gardening/) for these two documents:

How to Square Foot Garden  
Veg Plants per Square Foot

**The Master Gardeners will be available to answer your questions at a few select locations in the next few months!**

**Ace Hardware, Visalia - 1st Sat./every month**

**Luis Nursery, Visalia - 2nd Sat./every month**

**At this time, we are not in the office to answer phone calls, but if you send us an email or leave a message on our phone lines, someone will call you back!**

Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325; Kings County at (559) 852-2736

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