

Why Don't You Grow Up???

By **Kate Halvorson**

UCCE/ El Dorado County Master Gardener

Each new garden season, dreams of the best vegetable garden and most colorful flower beds dance in our heads. This year, why not think “up,” and try vertical gardening? It’s a convenient, innovative way to maximize what you grow in less space. It works for growing fruits, vegetables, flowers and landscape plants. This article focuses on unlocking the potential for more produce in backyard gardens.

Think “out of the box” and don’t grow anything horizontally that can be grown vertically. Many plants naturally vine or grow upward, and can be directed up on supports with minor pruning and strings or wire. The primary advantage to vertical gardening is getting more fruit and veggies from a smaller space. Produce is healthier with longer yields, because plants receive more sunlight. Keeping fruit, stems, and leaves off the ground reduce pests and disease. Targeted watering to the base of plants is more efficient. Growing vertically saves your back with less digging and easier weeding. Harvesting is less complicated, too – avoiding the “picker’s headstand” to get that tomato lurking under the vine!

The sky’s the limit on types of vertical support structures. They include pergolas, trellises, posts, netting, stakes, strings, arches, arbors, or tents. Tall plants (corn, okra and sunflowers) can support other plants. Supports aren’t only “bottom-up” structures; “Topsy Turvy” and similar pots allow growth from the top down, and are good for small spaces like decks.

Plants suited to vertical gardening are vining vegetables like pole beans and cucumbers that grow best on lightweight sticks, poles or nets. Tomato support depends on the variety: determinate tomatoes (those that ripen all their fruit at the same time, like Patio, Cherry tomatoes) grow to a specific height, and can be trained to a center stake, and indeterminate (those that produce all season long like Beef Steak, Early Girl) are vining tomatoes that need a center stake and support from wire cages or netting for large side branches. Pumpkins, melons and summer squash can be real “ground hogs” if they aren’t up on sturdy trellis or wire supports. Sweet potatoes grow underground, but their leaves can go up a trellis. Most dwarf or semi-dwarf fruit trees can be espaliered along a fence or wall by training new limbs along parallel wires.

Last, more room is created under the vertical plants for non-vine vegetables like onions, peppers, Swiss chard, eggplant, lettuce and herbs. Don’t be space-challenged in your garden this year... just grow up!

The next Master Gardener class will be held on Saturday, June 2nd. If you love flowers and enjoy floral design you won’t want to miss this free three-hour class which will cover cutting gardens, the best flower varieties to grow and how to take care of them once they have been cut. It starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.