

Crop Planning

Growing fabulous foliage and flowers, reliably, is not possible by just tossing some seeds into the soil and walking away. Our crops, and our successes, take time, planning, knowledge, and resources. Putting those factors into your plan for the upcoming seasons can help ensure successes of your own!

Utilize this elementary guide as we break down and explain some of our knowledge on crop planning!

Succession Planting

Succession planting can be as easy or complex as you want it to be! Because we are so fortunate to have access to so many different types of flowers, we only plant successions of a few crops. Here are my tips-

Sunflowers- Direct seed single stem sunflowers when the first true leaf is fully visible on the previous planting. Sew your second planting of branching sunflowers as soon as you see the first head starting to form on the previous planting.

Snaps- For single stems, seed plugs every two weeks. For branching, seed plugs when the previous plants have fully branched out.

Amaranth- Seed like sunflowers for both single stem and branching

Zinnias- For branching plants, seed plugs when the previous planting is starting to show buds. Most zinnias are not resistant to mildews and other fungal pressures. Doing multiple plantings of zinnias can ensure a consistently healthy clean cutting crop.

These are just some of the notes that we utilize on our farm. Many of these timing practices can be transferred to different types of flowers/plants. Also, notice that by pinching/encouraging branching, we aren't needing to do as many succession plantings over the growing season.

Selection Charisticks- Focus on branches

We grow very few crops that are one-hit-wonders. Planning and growing crops takes an immense amount of time and energy; we want to utilize all of those non-renewable inputs. With this in mind, I focus on selecting plants that have a good branching habit. Branching refers to a plants ability to send out more than one stem over the course of it's production time. Branching is often induced by pinching the terminal bud on an actively growing plant. Selecting varieties with a branching habit allows us to focus on 2 (sometimes only 1) planting per season. If we were growing only single stem plants, we would be doing succession plantings every other week.

Plug Lead Time

Growing plugs takes time. Don't forget that! When planning crops, we refer to this "seedling growing time" as "lead time". Most cut annual plugs take 4-6 weeks to fill out a 128 plug cell. The larger the cell, the longer the lead time. Some plants/varieties take longer than others. Lisianthus, eucalyptus, and some perennials are planned with a 10-16 week lead time. Knowing the lead time for specific crops will help you in planning for seeding dates, bed flips, etc.

Planning Vegetative Cuttings

Sometimes, to make the numbers work in your favor, you just need to do the work yourself. A large portion of our propagation house under bench space is devoted to maintaining pots of mother plants for our heirloom and fancy mums, some herbs, salvias, etc. We begin to harvest the vegetative cuttings 3-4 weeks before we will have prepped beds for rooted plugs to be planted in.

By producing our own cuttings and rooted plugs, we continue to save money, maintain quality to our standards, and can manage the timeline to our specifications.

Growing in Covered Space- 4 Seasons of Use

Regardless of additional heat, greenhouses/tunnels/etc. can be utilized during the entire year.

- Early spring blooms (Cool crops like snaps, dianthus, ranunculus, etc.) are started and planted in the fall. If supplemental heat is not available, frost cloths will need to be used. Once the early spring blooms are done producing, late summer/fall blooms are planted.

- Late summer/fall blooms (dahlias, snaps, heirloom mums, etc) should be pre started and ready to go by the end of June. These plants will produce until frost or disease takes them out.

When the late summer/fall blooms are done, start the entire process over again. This double flip utilizes all 4 seasons of the year. Covered space is an incredible tool and asset to have on your farm. Don't forget about that as you begin to invest in your profitability!

If you do have the ability to add heat to a structure, you can push your early spring blooms to come into flush sooner. This allows you to get your late summer blooms planted sooner and harvest off of them for a longer time frame.

Planning Perennial Bloom Times

Perennials are some of the most profitable, and very overlooked, groups on our farm. When selecting new perennials, look for types with long bloom/harvest windows and diversify your perennial bloom times.

Spring Blooming

-Hellebore, Peony, Lilac, Mockorange, Snowball Viburnum, Allium, Ladys Mantle, Iris, Baptisia, Pussy Willow, Daffodil, Astilbe, Bleeding Hearts, Lily of the Valley, etc.

Summer (early-late)

-Yarrow, Mint, Sedum, Veronica, Eryngium, Echinops, Asclepias, Roses, Liatris, Lilies, Ninebark, Smokebush, Hydrangea, Echinacea, Grasses, etc.

Fall

-Hydrangea, Ninebark, Viburnum, Echinacea, Eryngium, Echinops, Roses, Yarrow, Mint, Sedum, etc.

Having the space to devote to perennials is oftentimes a huge luxury. However, established perennials can be a safety net for annual crop failures, as well as relatively low maintenance money makers.

Importance of Planned Crop Rotations

Rotating (moving crop specific planting locations from year to year) can seem like one more hurdle to jump over when you're planning your year in bloom. Keep this simple method in mind- Flower, Foliage, Root

Year 1- If you have a plant, that you are intending to harvest the bloom off of, but not the root, don't plant the same type in that location the following year. For example, let's say you have zinnias planted in this metaphorical "space"

Year 2- In the same "space" plant a foliage if you can. Slow growing herbs, cabbage, kale, eucalyptus, etc. are all great foliage options that you will fly through! Better yet, plant a cover crop on this space! You'll need all the fertility help you can get for year 3.

Year 3- Now let's plant some roots! Dahlias, Cannas, Lilies, and more are all great options for your year 3 in this "space". These plants all have a bulbing root system that will be dug up after the year is done. Because you are harvesting the roots, you are removing even more of the fertility and nutrients that were once in the soil.

Crop rotations are very important from many facets. Rotating crops helps cut down on species specific insects, pests and diseases. Ensuring a gradual crop rotation also helps make sure soil nutrients are being used consistently.

Speaking of soil nutrition and health, it is always a good idea to get your soils tested and amended regularly. Knowing which nutrients specific plant processes will need, will help you in making decisions on what elements/inputs to amend your soil with.

Foliage crops need lots of nitrogen.

Flower and root crops need lots of phosphorus.

All plants need potassium.

Planting in Challenging Spaces

Knowing which species to plant in troublesome environments can be difficult, but is an awesome tool to have in your memory bank. Take some time to learn where certain plants naturalize and use that information to your advantage.

-Willows, astilbe, etc. thrive on consistently moist soils. Plant these types in areas that hold moisture for a long period of time.

-Perennials with strong root systems make great permanent plantings on hills and steep slopes. By planting a long lived perennial in this space, you are reducing needed tillage and eliminating additional soil erosion. Plants like yarrow, mint, echinacea, grasses, shrubs, etc. make great slope plantings.

-Quick growing annuals also are great crops to grow if you are dealing with a soil that holds moisture for a prolonged period of time. Once that soil has finally dried enough to work, plant quick turn crops like zinnias, amaranth, cosmos, etc.

-Take time and pay attention to your own specific microclimates! If your farm stays cool, longer into the late spring/summer (ex: your farm is on the north side of a hill), utilize that to your advantage. Grow sweet peas and other cool crops longer into the summer, while your competition will have already moved onto hot summer crops.

Cool Crops

Fall Planted

Direct Seeded in Unheated Tunnels (October)

-Bells of Ireland, Nigella, Larkspur, Delphinium, Bachelor Buttons, Calendula, Poppies, etc

Plugged into Unheated Tunnels- (Seeded early September, planted in early October)

-Fancy poppies, Delphinium, Snaps, Stock, Dianthus, Viola, etc

Early Spring Planted (open field or with cover) (planted 4-6 weeks before last frost date)

Direct Seeded

-Bells of Ireland, Nigella, Larkspur, Delphinium, Bachelor Buttons, Calendula, Poppies, etc

Plugged

-Snaps, Stock, Strawflower, Ammobium, Sweet Peas, Cabbage, Kale, Dianthus, Dusty Miller, etc.

Summer Planted (Seeded July-August, Planted 4-6 weeks after seeding)

-Stock, Snaps, Dianthus (for fall blooming, heated tunnel needed.)

Hot Crops

Spring Planted (Seeded 4-6 weeks before last frost date. Planted in field after frost has passed)

-Zinnia, celosia, amaranth, cosmo, herbs, marigold, grasses, assorted seed grown perennials, etc.