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Step off straight and narrow for your garden

If you are planning a vegetable garden this summer, it's time to get to work. Here are some ideas to make your efforts more efficient and productive.

First, you'll want to determine the best location for your garden. The most popular of all permaculture principles – "Work is pollution" – applies here. Why create extra work for yourself by exiling your garden to some distant corner of your property? This practice comes from a time when society looked down on growing veggies. Now that it is widely recognized that homegrown food is healthier and more ecologically conscious than factory-farmed food, this has changed.

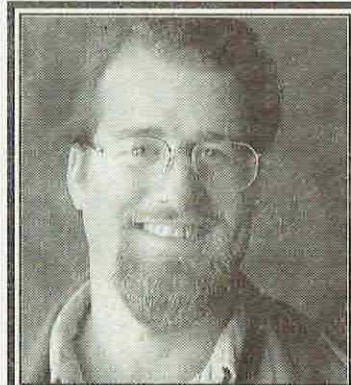
I have a theory that every step away from your kitchen door that you put your garden means a time that you will neglect to visit your garden in a given year. This means that weeds and pests can get out of hand before you know it, and precious, ripe produce can rot on the vine without

being harvested. This translates into more work and less reward for your efforts.

Second, you'll want to reconsider any preconceived notions that you have about planting in straight rows. Working with nature, the most basic of permaculture principles, suggests that there are real benefits to planting gardens in curved rows. There are very few, if any, straight lines in nature. So, why should we try to impose our abstract Cartesian mindset on the real world?

Curved garden rows protect plants from the effects of our often brutal winds. Straight rows tend to multiply these damaging effects, which include higher evaporation rates, increased soil erosion, sand blasting, and branch and stem breakage. Bill Mollison, the father of permaculture, even claims to have witnessed a "zucchini uproot and bowl along like a tumbleweed."

Curved rows also serve an aesthetic function in the landscape by allowing



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in practice**
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plants to seem as if they were not forced on the land, but rather as if the plants were always meant to be there. If people perceive the rows at all, their elegant undulations will produce a soothing effect among all who wander by. This also helps to blur the somewhat contrived distinction between "garden" and "landscape," and this in turn helps to encourage more interest in the garden.

Perhaps the least obvious but most important (from an efficiency/productivity standpoint) reason to plant in curved rows is that they use space better than straight rows. In any straight-row system a small patch of wasted garden space exists (in the middle of the square made from any four neighboring plants). In *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual* (Tagari Publications, 1988) Mollison demonstrates that 45 plants fit in curved rows while only 36 plants fit in straight rows given an equal area and the same inter-row and in-line spacing.

The wasted space in straight row gardening also creates more work for the gardener since the unplanted areas make a larger aggregate area that will need to be weeded. In addition water is wasted in a less-dense, straight row system as compared to a more compact, curved row system.

It is important to consider which species of fruits and vegetables you will plant in

your garden. Some plants are strong allies. Others are compatible companions. And a small number of plants are incompatible with each other.

In permaculture, we plant flora in beneficial relationships called "guilds." In a typical guild one plant will protect the others from prevailing winds. Another will attract beneficial insects. A third will fix nitrogen in the soil. Others will act as a living mulch by shading the soil and preventing the encroachment of unwanted weeds. Still others will repel certain nasty garden pests. For more information on guilds in the vegetable garden, an excellent resource is *Rodale's Successful Organic Gardening: Companion Planting* (Rodale Press, 1994).

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