

The Subsistence Gardener

SOWING SEEDS

If you are trying to sow vegetable seeds directly into your garden soil, this can be quite a stressful time of year. It is quite common for whole rows of seeds to fail to germinate, or to germinate only in patches, or for young seedlings to be ravaged by slugs, or eaten by birds. It is easy to become discouraged, but, even so, it is well worth continuing with direct planting.

Old Thinking / New Thinking

During the last century, commercial farming, and market gardening fell increasingly under the sway of the type of scientific thinking that had originally started to emerge towards the end of the Middle Ages. This sought to understand the material world by breaking things down to their constituent parts, and studying how they behave when isolated from all possible variants. This led to a certain understanding of the physical properties of inert substances, and contributed to the development of new technologies and industrial processes, but has proved to be more problematic when applied to living things.

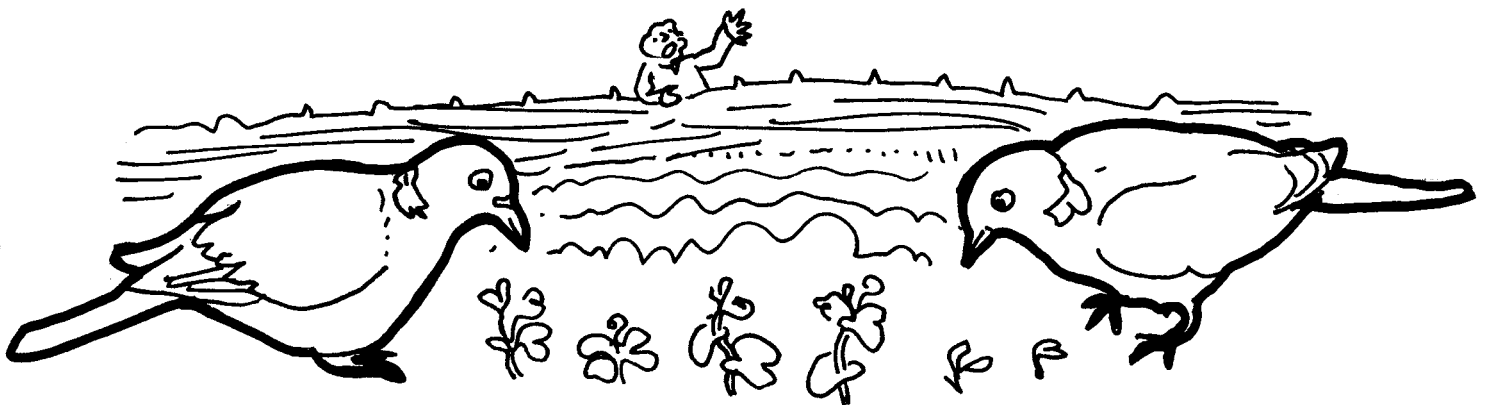
A more modern way of thinking is that a living system - such as a garden - consists of innumerable different elements, all of which are interacting with each other to create a balanced, self-sustaining eco-system.

For example, a seed, in this way of thinking, is regarded as being an individual entity that simply requires certain chemical elements or compounds from the soil, plus sunlight (or artificial light), and water, in order to grow, and eventually yield the desired crop. If anything goes wrong, it is assumed to be due to a malevolent organism (insects, fungi, weeds, etc.) disrupting a process that is otherwise working smoothly, and the problem can be solved by eradicating the offending organism with one chemical or another. To most people, this has seemed to work well over the past decades, and it has allowed the food industry to keep the supermarket shelves fully stocked with their products. However, unforeseen consequences have become apparent in recent years - loss of biodiversity, health issues related to modern foods, farming not having a sustainable economic model, various environmental problems including climate change... and our seeds not growing when we plant them in the ground.

A more modern way of thinking is that a living system - such as a garden - consists of innumerable different elements (crop plants, wild plants, trees, shrubs, birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, fungae, mosses, lichens, bacteria, slugs, snails, soil types, water conditions, orientation, gradients, etc., etc.), all of which are interacting with each other to create a balanced, self-sustaining system. It is probably not possible to track all these interactions, nor to fully understand how many are having a positive effect upon the growth of any particular plant at any particular time, but it is possible to see that so many of them have now been disrupted that natural systems are no longer working properly.

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Restoring Health to the Garden

The main task of today's gardener is to try to restore enough complexity to the garden for it to start working as a coherent unit again. This is mainly done by recycling organic material through compost heaps and piles of mulch, and returning it to the soil, so that the garden can re-create its own culture of bacteria and other micro-organisms, which in turn nurture a unique insect population, and a diverse range of plants and animals, i.e. giving the garden time to heal itself, rather than trying to push it in one direction or another.

When you plant seeds in the garden, you get an indication of how things are going, and that is why it is worth persisting, even in the face of disappointments. If some sowings don't work at all, the ground can be raked over and the crop re-sown – May sowings often work well, especially if the weather is not too dry. There are also crops, such as chicory, and turnips, that can be sown later on, and spaces in the garden can be filled by buying plants – such as leek plants, cabbages, or cucumbers. The short-term aim may be to have a well-stocked, productive vegetable garden this year, but if you keep an eye on the long-term aim of restoring the garden to health, then you can often find reasons to be cheerful, even when some crops don't work out.

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