



Polyculture - how, what?

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The season has really kicked in - spring is early but yet late, we have frosts up here in at 1000m until sometimes even mid may. So its a constant challenge to control one's bursting energy to help seeds start and burst out with their energy. Having many seeds in your care it is as if they are all nagging at you.

Last time I had only just been repairing the state that comes when you leave for 4 months. My conservatory/office had a lot of dead plants - which were actually an experiment to see answer the question "do tomatoes really want to die after one season". The answer was - mostly they die. I had one which had some life way up at the top, perhaps because the warm air was high up. I cut off the top and planted it as a clone, it's a fairly sad looking thing. Another tomato plant started late, lived through winter (moldy disease and all) and I stripped away it's diseased leaves. It is now providing clones, I take suckers that have grown very rapidly. So that will hopefully be my early tomato batch of some kind of tomato which I have since lost track of the variety.

But this was only the slow start, I have tray after tray of seedlings. Lettuces, Choi, squash ... and whoever thought of a "mixed squash" seed packet was a bit off. Not all of them come up at the same time, so I hold my breath with many pots that show no germination while others race away. I certainly is much easier to start and grow early indoors. My indoor lettuce is enjoying absolutely rampant growth.

Most of my potting mix is made from reused pots from last year, those had manure and soil. Over winter worms got in and improved it. The rest are done with mole dirt - hills of it are everywhere, it is full of weed seed but it seems great for germination, great water retention. I don't use commercial potting mix, mostly because I can't afford it but also because I think it is bizarre stuff, I like dirt and rotted leaves, grass or whatever we composted. I have some pots that have commercial potting mix from a donated plant, it doesn't seem to work particularly better than my mix. I figure the plant will know what to expect when it gets replanted in the same kinds of soil outside.

Three times now I have had a blast sowing my own experimental seed mix. I used various collections so it is relatively diverse. Many of us have tried wildflower seed mix, but have you made your own. After following a lot of talk in the permaculture, soil restoration and garden ecosystem area - it is so interesting and you get easily inspired to try it. The teachers rattle of names of this and that - but often they just say "this is a seed mix of over 100 types, many very rare". Thats great for them, but then you don't ever really find out what they used as if it is a guarded secret, its plenty of talk of long and short rooted plants, and how plants help each other - but which ones. As for poly-cultures on youtube I saw someone out there experimenting with a very diverse mixed vegetable garden bed. So this approach seems to be what you have to do. Polyculture my way is: start by acquiring many seeds, mix them semi-intelligently by companion planting charts and advice, plant in the best conditions you can produce - possibly direct seeding is best way and learn by experience. It would be hard to have a complete failure, some things may thrive on neglect if you end up leaving them to get their water naturally.

Today was a seed broadcast (feels more like a biological bombing run) beds and zones with mixtures of from 10-16 types, in all 3 cases they were all completely different seeds. Some are companion, pest predator attractors - such as yarrow. Others are medicinal seed packs and there was a vegetable seed mix - with a few calendula and herbs. So the bio-diversity of my garden is starting to build for this year. I have no idea how it will turn out but it will be a strong place of interest and study so I have to get some net benefit if not the ultimate result I am trying to emulate. The idea is that some plants starting earlier may create good conditions and niches for others, some seeds may not take initially, or ever. Maybe some will come up next year if they have a hard enough shell. With the vegetable garden polyculture the early growers you pull up and leave room for others to fill in the space, its like a lazy persons succession planting.

Nearby, over the hill is our fledgling community garden - it too has taken shape in last two weeks being plowed, soil amended by a local farmer and today for several hours I helped build a poly tunnel - or you might call it a hoop house. No plastic cover yet, but just the frame was a heavy job for sure. That place is like a football field - its just too big for me and the main gardener to handle. So I have been talking him into letting me do a seed mix broadcast in some places, cover crop in other zones we can't get to this year.

Over the last two weeks I didn't get the glasshouse for my own backyard built, just the foundation which is cement blocks - that was really hard to make flat, level and stable. We had to put gravel underneath and keep pulling them out to adjust the height - it was a real perfectionists night mare. Lucky I had a perfection to obsess over it helping me. Now I have to figure out the manual for that thing.

So I look forward to reporting back what happens. The start of many new garden experiences has begun now that my work to evangelise this has been done and the ball is in my court to do my thing.

Keep it dirty and damp, warm it up, watch it grow.

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