

Why Moon Planting Works

Investigating and explaining a persistent myth

About 15 years ago I decided to see if moon planting worked. (For those who have been too sceptical to have ever glanced at the subject, moon planting assumes that the position of the Moon relative to the Earth influences the way plants grow. Some phases of the moon are optimum for plants where the leaf growth is most important; other phases are best for plants where the roots matter most to the growers; other times are 'barren' when nothing should be planted.)

Okay, moon planting seemed like a load of codswallop.¹ But many gardeners — particularly the 'my organic tomatoes are bigger than your organic tomatoes' sort who have climbing beans so vigorous they could be planning to strangle their owners in their beds — swore that they owed it all to moon planting. I wondered if just perhaps moon planting did have a bit of a wallop without the cod, and was worth investigating further.

Testing moon planting is not simple. It's easy to test a new fertiliser for example — four or six as identical as you can make them plots, each planted with seeds of the same bean variety at the same time but grown with different fertiliser regimes. Watch how long till the first flowers, the first beans, weigh the crop, make a note of pest numbers, diseased leaves, how many days the bean plants fruit for...

But this wouldn't work for moon planting. The whole essence of moon

planting is that there is one ideal time each month to plant. This meant that the trial crops couldn't be planted on the same day — and any beans planted before the ideal day would have had longer to grow, and any planted after that time would have less.

Finally I dug six long rows and planted two bean seeds in each row every day over a three-month period. If the moon planting theory worked then the bean seeds planted on the optimum days should do better than the ones planted either side.

They didn't.

Of the seed planted the first month, the seeds planted **after** the moon planted seeds flowered earlier and were more productive. The effect was similar but not as marked for the second month. In the third month the beans flowered in an almost perfect gradation — the earlier they were planted, the earlier they flowered and fruited.

Conclusion:

Planting by the moon seemed to have no effect whatsoever on bean seeds.

I dismissed moon planting for a decade, merely murmuring tactfully to questions at garden shows that no, I didn't follow moon planting, I'd tested it and it didn't seem to work... usually adding with extreme cowardice 'for me'.

Except over the following years I kept hearing impassioned declara-



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*. She wrote the books, not made the shelf⁵.

** . Come to think of it she made the shelf too.

tions from moon planting gardeners, who swore that planting by the moon worked for them.

Okay, human kind likes to create order in a complex world and all the rest of it, and neat charts that document some aspect of the natural world are comforting even when they're hogwash. Or perhaps moon planters feel they achieve some mystic communion with the natural world by following the guidance of the moon, a pleasing combination of spiritual one-upmanship and the ability to grow more beans than their neighbours.

But still...

Years after that first test, I discovered that there are several schools of moon planting. One person's successful day with brassicas may be another's time to commune with carrots.

So I tried it again, with competing moon charts. Still no win for moon planting. And, no, when I looked back at my initial results the peak growing times still didn't correspond to anyone's idea of the best 'moon times' — they were due to faster growth in warmer soil. And there the matter rested, until today...

...when I woke up² and suddenly realised why I'd been wrong for 15 years. And why moon planting **does** work. (Which possibly the observant reader has already worked out from the material above.)³

Let's look at a possible scenario. Gardener I is a moon planter; Gardener II isn't. Both gardeners wait till spring to plant their beans. (No sensible cool climate gardener will plant beans in winter. It's too cold for them to germinate, and many seeds will rot or be taken by ants.)

But come the first warm spell Gardener II succumbs to one of the great spring urges and plants the beans at the first hint that spring has arrived. Gardener I, on the other hand, waits till the next good moon planting time before planting the seeds.

Early warm spells are usually followed by another cold one... and again seed planted too early may rot. Even if it doesn't, plants that suffer any set-back when they are young

usually don't do as well as plants that have flourished right from the start. (The set-back can be from cold, boggy soil, snail or scale attack — the effect is the same). So counter-intuitively, beans that are planted later in spring will probably do better than beans planted too early.⁴

Result:

Gardener I's moon planted beans produce sturdier plants and crop earlier.

The reverse may happen in autumn — the moon planting gardener will be aware that they only have one good time to plant, so may get their seeds in without delay — and in autumn, earlier planting into warmer soil usually means bigger plants.

It's this tendency to slightly later spring planting and perhaps slightly earlier autumn planting, that I suspect is the reason so many gardeners will swear that they see an effect. (One keen gardener who has been following moon planting for more than 30 years once told me that he finds moon planting more effective for early rather than late spring plants, though he believes it's because the young spring moon is more powerful.)

Which means that generations of gardeners may not be deluded about the efficacy of moon planting. It just works for a different reason than the one they believed.

Folklore

Folklore is often based on accurate observation. It's just the rationale that may be codswallop. Over the years I've tested various bits of 'companion planting' folklore. And some actually work — though not because 'basil likes tomatoes'. (As a matter of fact this common bit of companion planting lore doesn't work at all — basil tends to get black spot planted near tomatoes, while the tomatoes do neither better nor worse. And never trust a gardening book that tells you that marigolds (*Tagetes spp*) deter aphids — beans, onions and fuchsias planted with

marigolds get **more** aphids, not fewer, and I suspect the same may be true for a range of other plants.

But root knot nematodes, for example, do appear to avoid the root secretions of marigolds, though a companion crop of marigolds can make the problem worse because... and at this stage I had better stop treatise Number 56 on companion planting...)

It's worth remembering, though, that sometimes an observation may be true, even though the reasoning is faulty.

Notes

1. Codswallop: According to *The Oxford Library of Words and Phrases* cod's head was slang for blockhead (XVI) hence prob. (sl.) cod fool, simpleton (XVII) whence cod vb. (sl.) hoax, humbug (XIX). But more intriguingly (and colourfully) Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable has: Codswallop. Nonsense. The word is of uncertain origin but the following story is sometimes offered to account for it. In 1875 Hiram Codd patented a mineral water bottle with a marble stopper. Wallop is a slang term for beer. Thus Codd's wallop is said to have become a disparaging term among beer drinkers for mineral waters and weak drinks and in due course gained a more general application.

2. Literally not symbolically, as in 'opened eyes and got out of bed'.

3. Actually this moment of enlightenment was probably sparked by an email the night before, asking if I knew anyone who would give an interview on moon planting, and a mooch at dusk among this year's bean crop, where I noticed once again that the ones I'd planted later germinated before the ones I'd planted with the usual gardener's boundless and baseless optimism on the first day with a breath of warm air.

4. This works with most other spring veg too of course, not just beans. The effect is slightly different with spring flowers — early planted seeds or seedlings may bloom earlier, but the plants won't be as large and so the flowering time will be shorter, with fewer and often smaller blooms.

