

Gardening for Food

by Marlys Bell

More of us are growing at least some of our food according to the National Gardening Association, which has been keeping statistics for the last 30 years. We have concerns about the economy and jobs, food contamination and additives, and the quality and availability of our food. Growing fruits and vegetables can save money while providing more control over and enjoyment of the food we eat. Ideas—such as new food varieties (blue potatoes), pursuit of perfect tomatoes, interest in healthier living, and consumption of food that is fresh, organic, in season and grown locally—also fuel the trend.

Fortunately, in the Mother Lode, even in small spaces, it is possible to eat from the garden nearly year round with edibles like lettuce, spinach, and broccoli in the cool weather and tomatoes, corn, peppers, zucchini and beans in the warm weather. For those with more space and patience, the menu can be broadened to include seasonal treats like strawberries, blueberries, rhubarb, asparagus, apples and cherries. To get the maximum yield, nutrition and enjoyment from the edible garden, these are some tips to consider.

Where:

Edible gardens can be squeezed in most anywhere, even the front yard or on the deck in containers. It also does not have to be all in one place. For those with existing landscaping, many edible perennial plants such as strawberries, rhubarb, blueberries, fruit trees and fennel are attractive enough to be included in the landscaping. Annuals (those that last just one season) such as basil, eggplant and peppers, can be tucked into the landscaping in late spring where they can add color and interest and then replaced in late fall with other annuals like broccoli, cabbage, spinach or Swiss chard. In that situation, containers planted with dwarf varieties of favorite fruits and vegetables could provide additional gardening space. For example, in addition to the Meyer's lemon tree, I also have a cook's garden in containers just outside the kitchen where I can grab some herbs, salad greens or cherry tomatoes, which is handy, especially after dark. Wine barrels with holes drained in the bottom work well for tomatoes, potatoes and other larger plants. Fences, trellises and teepees can support climbers like peas, squash and pole beans while providing vertical interest and conserving space.

For those with a little more room, the most effective way to grow most vegetables is in raised beds that are about four feet wide, twelve feet long and at least twelve inches deep. These can be made from concrete block, untreated lumber, stacked stones or retaining wall blocks. For anyone wanting more temporary gardens, straw bales can be used to form the walls or some plants such as tomatoes, squash, and peppers can be grown in the bales.

Perennials such as asparagus, berries, rhubarb, fruit trees and many herbs do not need to be grown in raised beds as long as they are not disturbed and there is good drainage. Although most vegetables need plenty of sun, most salad greens and berries need shade protection so light conditions should be considered when determining what to plant where. The other issue to be considered is water availability since many vegetables require regular water to yield the best product. As a minimum, a garden hose should be easily accessible.

Many of us in the Mother Lode need to protect our vegetables from deer, raccoons, and rabbits. That usually means a fence or screening. Deterring gophers requires hardware cloth or screen in the bottom of the garden or cages for individual plants. Anticipating the inevitable arrival of these critters and taking adequate precautions avoids frustration later.

When:

Critical to vegetable gardening success is planting when the soil is ready and at the right time of year. For those living at elevations lower than 2500 feet, it is usually possible to get two cool weather crops—one planted after Labor Day and the other planted in early spring. Those at higher elevations usually get only one cool weather crop of broccoli, Swiss chard, spinach or peas that can be planted when the snow leaves and the soil is dry enough so that it crumbles rather than clumps, usually in March or early April. The warm weather crops such as tomatoes and peppers are planted after the danger of frost has passed which is usually about Mothers' Day or when the soil and night temperatures are at least 50 degrees. To decrease the number of days needed to get the food to the table, many vegetable seeds can be started inside about two months prior to planting outside. Examples of those that transplant easily are corn, tomatoes, peppers, beets, broccoli, and some of the salad greens. Seedlings are usually available at the garden centers. Others such as carrots, radishes, and potatoes should be sown directly into the ground.

How:

Organic: Many gardeners believe that in order to achieve maximum health benefits, committing to organic methods is necessary. That means avoiding synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers and other potentially harmful practices. By logical extension, "organic" also implies a preference for natural, unaltered seeds and plants. Many gardeners are reverting to heirloom varieties to avoid GMOs (genetically modified organisms).

Successfully growing edibles organically depends upon several steps. Start with soil amended with organic matter such as leaves, manure, and compost. The next step utilizes planting strategies that get maximum yield with a minimum amount of space while producing beneficial relationships among plants. One technique is to eliminate the concept of rows and to plant the whole area with, for example, salad greens, beets, onions, radishes and parsnips. As the radishes mature and get pulled out, there is room for other plants to grow or a hole where beans or something else can be inserted. Another variation alternates rows with early and later crops so as the older crop matures and is harvested, it makes more room for the new crop to get bigger. Other techniques include companion planting or combining plants that do well together such as corn, squash, beans and cleome. The corn provides support for the squash to climb, the beans add nitrogen to the soil for the corn, a heavy feeder, and the cleome attracts good bugs that eat bad bugs.

Another important step is including flowers and herbs to attract pollinators and beneficial bugs which make the garden more beautiful, healthy and productive. Ladybugs, praying mantis, lacewings, assassin bugs and many others will take care of the bad bugs such as aphids, whiteflies, cabbage loopers and other pests. To attract them, plant dill, fennel, tansy, cleome, cosmos, coneflower, nasturtiums, and zinnias.

Pay attention to soil replenishment between crops. Crop rotation is an important step in controlling pests and disease. Since most crops benefit from a 3-4 year rotation cycle, grouping plants into botanical families is wise. For example, the Solanaceae botanical family (tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and peppers) needs a four-year rotation cycle. Move plants to a new spot each year, returning to the original planting area in the fourth year. This family also prefers more acidic soil, attracts common pests such as flea and Colorado potato beetle, and benefits by being planted with basil, parsley, fennel, sunflowers, asters and cosmos. When you rotate, keep the group together to make the job easier.

For those interested in learning more about vegetable gardening and its new trends and techniques, visit the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden. It's open the first Saturday of each month from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at 251 S. Barretta Street in Sonora, the Cassina High Campus. On March 7, Master Gardeners will demonstrate preparing soil for a vegetable bed, pruning grapevines, and will answer questions about buffalo grass, a lawn alternative. It is not too late. You can start growing your food today.

Marlys Bell is using her property to demonstrate how to live "more green" by growing more fruits and vegetables.