



Gardening

A Growing Activity

by Phyllis McIntosh





Vegetables that ripen on the vine—like these tomatoes—taste better than those that are artificially ripened and shipped great distances.

In cities and towns across the United States, people are flooding websites and jamming phone lines, hoping to be among the lucky few. They are not vying for jobs or tickets to a rock concert. Rather, they hope to rent or borrow a plot of public land on which to plant a garden.

Gardens are springing up everywhere. A highly publicized one thrives even on the south lawn of the White House in Washington, D.C. And gardening is no longer a rural or suburban pastime. City dwellers without yard space are gardening in containers, on rooftops, or in

those prized community plots. According to a survey conducted by the National Gardening Association, 83 million U.S. households participate in some type of gardening activity.

While Americans are as eager as ever to beautify their homes and yards with attractive landscaping, more and more gardeners are looking to the practical aspects of gardening—raising plants for food and choosing easy-care ornamental plants that are friendly to the environment.

Growing Our Own Food

In times of national crisis, self-reliant Americans have looked to the garden as a source of food. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, millions of people planted “relief gardens” in yards or on any vacant piece of land. During World War II, 20 million “victory gardens” provided fresh produce for the home front and freed up food supplies for the war effort.

It’s not surprising, then, that the current economic downturn has sparked a resurgence of interest in edible plantings, including vegetables, herbs, fruit trees, and berry bushes. In the National Gardening Association survey, 34 percent of gardeners said the recession was motivating them to grow their own food. The Association estimates that a well-maintained food garden yields a \$500 return when the gardener’s investment and the market price of produce are taken into account.

For some gardeners, raising their own food is a lifestyle choice. With doctors and the government urging consumption of fruits and vegetables to combat obesity and lower the risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, some people see the backyard garden as a short route to healthier eating.

An added advantage is that home-grown food is of superior quality. Fruits and vegetables that ripen on the vine taste



Planting vegetables in pots creates a mobile garden that can fit in limited space.

better than those that are artificially ripened and spend weeks in shipment before they reach the table. While commercially grown produce is often contaminated with unknown amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, gardeners can guarantee the safety of what they grow themselves. Proponents of the “eat local” movement also point out that, over the long term, reducing the need to transport food great distances helps decrease energy use and air pollution.

Creative approaches to gardening ensure that more Americans can enjoy the experience of growing their own food. Mixed-use gardens in which vegetables such as beans, squash, and tomatoes are tucked amid the blooms in a flower garden are increasingly popular. Raised bed gardens contained within wooden, stone, or plastic frames give gardeners complete control over the quality of the soil and make it possible to create a productive garden over even the most barren surface. Because the beds are raised, tending the garden is less backbreaking work than bending over a lower garden. Another popular gardening method—planting

vegetables in pots—creates a mobile garden that can fit in limited space and take best advantage of changing light, moisture, and temperature.

Urban Gardening

A surprising amount of gardening is taking place amid the concrete, glass, and asphalt that define the urban landscape. An array of websites, magazines, and innovative new products is available to assist the aspiring urban gardener. Recent trends include:

- **Community gardens.** The most significant trend in urban gardening is the tremendous interest in community gardens—public spaces where individuals or groups can grow their own food and flowers. According to the American Community Gardening Association, some 18,000 such gardens have sprung up around the nation. Available plots are snapped up in days or hours, and cities and towns are scrambling to find additional space to accommodate the demand. The city of Portland,

Aluminum watering cans on hand in a community garden.



This former vacant lot in an inner city is now a thriving community garden.

Oregon, recently reported 1,400 families waiting for garden plots. One San Francisco resident who waited seven years for a plot and now coordinates the list for his neighborhood garden estimates that the wait time has stretched to two decades.

Community gardens are managed in various ways, but the Lower Macungie community in eastern Pennsylvania is typical. For about 10 dollars, a resident can rent a 30-foot by 20-foot space on land that is plowed in spring by the local public works department. Gardeners fill buckets from a nearby water tank to irrigate their plants during the growing season. Those who need assistance can take advantage of free seeds and gardening programs offered by the local government.

The community gardening experience sometimes spurs city residents to spruce up entire neighborhoods. Such was the case in a crime-ridden section of Philadelphia after a group of women reclaimed a vacant lot to create a garden. With help from the

city and a local horticultural organization, residents began to clean up graffiti, install new trees along the streets, plant flowers in containers and window boxes at their homes, and hold community festivals and gardening classes for kids. One of the most dangerous areas of the city was transformed into an attractive, safe neighborhood. Indeed, studies in a number of cities have shown that where greenery increases, crime goes down.

Some activists, known as guerrilla gardeners, go a step further and garden, often surreptitiously, in vacant lots, parks, median strips on city streets, sides of highways, and the patches of dirt between sidewalks and streets. They may secretly plant vegetables and berries, even among ornamental plants in city gardens, and tend their crops by dark of night. A favorite activity is to toss “seed bombs”—balls of soil, clay, and seeds—into any vacant lot where plants could potentially take hold.

- **Schoolyard gardens.** The interest in community gardening has spilled over into the nation’s schoolyards,



Plants in containers, like these herbs and flowers, can transform a patio or balcony into a colorful garden.

where children are learning how to grow their own nutritious fruits and vegetables as well as how to be stewards of the environment. According to the National Gardening Association, tens of thousands of schools have established gardens, greenhouses, and schoolyard habitats that enrich learning. A wide variety of organizations, from the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., to the California School Garden Network, are helping young people develop a love of gardening.

- **Container gardening.** Plants rooted in standing pots, hanging pots, and window boxes can transform a patio, porch, or apartment balcony into an instant garden. Some adventurous souls enjoy giving almost anything that will hold soil—used tires, wine barrels, leaky buckets, even shoes—new life as a plant container. Trendy products on the market in recent years include hanging pots from which tomatoes grow dangling upside down. Vertical gardening kits enable gardeners to grow climbing vegetables, flowers, and



A young student harvests lettuce from a schoolyard garden.

vines in a sliver of soil to create a living wall.

City rooftops are increasingly popular sites for container gardens, which can provide both fresh produce and a pleasant oasis for a building's occupants. Even some hotels in New York City and Chicago are growing vegetables, herbs, and fruits in containers on their roofs to supply their trendy restaurants. More ambitious individual gardeners and some corporations are opting for green roofs in which the entire roof surface is covered with a growing medium planted with vegetation. Such living roofs benefit the envi-



Eco-friendly gardeners are replacing their lawns with native plants, wildflowers, and easy-care perennial flowers

ronment by reducing rainwater runoff and significantly lowering energy use for air conditioning.

Eco-friendly Gardening

Gardeners today are eager to work with nature instead of trying to master it. As they pursue their hobby, they seek practices and products that leave a minimal imprint upon the environment. Eco-friendly gardeners are especially interested in:

- **Less lawn.** Maintaining a beautiful expanse of green grass around one's home requires chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and frequent watering. Regular lawn mowing uses energy and pollutes the air. The solution for many homeowners is to reduce the amount of lawn or replace it altogether with low growing ground covers, ornamental grasses, a vegetable garden, wildflowers, or easy-care perennial flowers and shrubs.
- **Native plants.** More gardeners are turning to native plants that are already adapted to local conditions and thrive with less fertilizer and water than non-natives. Exotic, or introduced, plants not only require more maintenance but also can spread uncontrollably, crowding out native species and upsetting the balance in the ecosystem. One glaring example is kudzu, an Asian vine imported into the United States in the 1930s to control erosion. Growing a foot a day and highly resistant to herbicides, kudzu has blanketed much of the southeastern United States, suffocating native trees and shrubs.
- **Water conservation.** A new status symbol for the savvy gardener is a rain barrel next to a home's downspout to collect water for the garden. Because collecting rainwater reduces customers' outdoor water use and reduces storm water runoff, many municipal water departments are handing out free rain barrels and providing simple instruction to help homeowners construct their own for as little as 40 dollars.

In chronically dry areas of the West and Southwest, an increasingly common practice is xeriscaping—landscaping with drought-resistant plants, such as natives cactuses and succulents.

- **Chemical-free gardening.** Instead of relying on chemical fertilizers, many gardeners are turning leaves, grass clippings, and vegetable kitchen scraps into rich compost to nourish their plants. Like rain barrels, compost piles and composting containers are marks of an eco-friendly garden.

Popular alternatives to toxic pesticides are biological methods that employ natural predators, such as beneficial insects and parasites, to control garden pests.

- **Attracting wildlife.** Besides going chemical-free, gardeners are purposely planting flowers and shrubs that provide food and habitat for butterflies, hummingbirds, and other wildlife. Organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) encourage other simple measures such as propping up old flowerpots as homes for mosquito-eating toads or leaving brush piles to provide cover for wildlife. Over the past 40 years, the NWF has recognized nearly 150,000 private yards, schoolyards, businesses, and places of worship as Certified Wildlife Habitats.

Of course, lush gardens sometimes attract too much wildlife, especially deer, whose populations have soared in the absence of natural predators. Garden centers and catalogs are full of deer repellents and supposedly deer-resistant plants, most of which are ineffective in deterring the determined animals.



Top: A rain barrel collects water from the downspout on this house. The rainwater will later be used to water plants.

Left: Gardeners concerned about the environment plant flowers that provide food and habitat for butterflies, hummingbirds, and other wildlife.

Millions of Americans of all ages agree that putting a seed into the ground and watching a plant grow—whether in a backyard garden, in a community plot, or in a container on an apartment balcony—is one of the simple joys of life. One California child summed it up well in describing his experience in a schoolyard garden: “When I get into the garden I feel like I am in another world. I feel special because it has a part of me. I planted something.”

Garden Glossary

annual – a plant that grows for only one season

biological pest control – using living organisms, such as beneficial insects or parasites, to destroy garden pests

compost – decomposed organic matter, such as leaves and vegetable scraps, used to provide nutrients to garden soil

cultivate – break the topsoil with a shovel, hoe, or rake to prepare it for planting; air the growth of (plants)

germination – the sprouting of a seed

growing season – the number of days between the average date of the last killing frost in spring and the first killing frost in fall

mulch – any loose material, usually organic matter such as leaves, grass clippings, or shredded tree bark, placed over soil to control weeds and conserve moisture

organic gardening – gardening without the use of chemical or synthetic fertilizers and pesticides

ornamental – a plant that is grown strictly for its foliage or flower

perennial – a plant that grows back every year

propagation – starting new plants by various methods such as from seeds or from cuttings taken from mature plants

Websites of Interest

American Community Gardening Association

www.communitygarden.org

This website covers all the basics about community gardening, including how to start a garden or find one nearby and the benefits of a group garden.

Green Guerillas

www.greenguerillas.org

A grassroots organization in New York City, Green Guerillas organizes city dwellers to turn vacant lots and other city land into community gardens and green spaces and educates city kids about gardening.

Kids Gardening

www.kidsgardening.com

An offshoot of the National Gardening Association, this site provides information and projects for parents and teachers to help young people get started in gardening.

National Gardening Association

www.garden.org

The ultimate in gardening information, this site features garden news, free newsletters, and expert advice, including how-to videos, on a variety of gardening topics.

White House Garden

www.whitehouse.gov/blog/The-Story-of-the-White-House-Garden

This official *Inside the White House* blog features a video of First Lady Michelle Obama and White House chef Sam Kass describing the planting and harvesting of the White House vegetable garden with the help of local school children.



Propagation

Phyllis McIntosh is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines.



The White House

The *White House* Garden

During World War II, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt led the war effort on the home front by establishing a victory garden at the White House. Nearly six decades later, another vegetable garden has sprouted on White House grounds to promote First Lady Michelle Obama's cause of reducing childhood obesity by encouraging youngsters to eat a healthy diet loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Fifth graders from Bancroft Elementary School in Washington, which has had its own garden since 2001, have helped Mrs. Obama dig and tend the garden and harvest the produce. The students also work with chefs in the White House kitchen to prepare and cook what they've grown. Some food from the garden finds its way into formal White House dinners and the Obamas' family meals; the rest is donated to a local kitchen that serves the homeless.

The garden features 55 varieties of vegetables, some from seeds handed down from the nation's third president, Thomas Jefferson. All are grown organically, fertilized with White House compost and crab meal from the nearby Chesapeake Bay. Beneficial insects, such as ladybugs and praying mantises, help control pests.

Mrs. Obama, who notes that the project was inspired in part by her desire to improve her own children's diet, says, "The garden is an important introduction to what I hope will be a new way that our country thinks about food."



Fresh vegetables

The People's Garden

In 2009 U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack took a jackhammer to an asphalt parking lot adjacent to his agency's headquarters in Washington, D.C., to begin turning the space into the six-acre People's Garden along the National Mall. Encompassing an organic vegetable garden, flower gardens, and mini-wetlands designed to control storm water runoff, the project helps educate millions of visitors to the Mall about eco-friendly gardening. Public events in the garden feature chefs explaining how to cook vegetables and experts discussing such topics as collecting rainwater for a home garden. The garden, tended mainly by Department of Agriculture employees who volunteer their time, annually produces several hundred pounds of fresh produce that is donated to a food kitchen that serves the poor.

The garden project sparked a nationwide People's Garden Initiative supported by thousands of employees at Department of Agriculture facilities throughout the country. Thanks to their volunteer efforts and partner organizations such as Keep America Beautiful, there are now some 1,200 People's Gardens in all 50 states, two U.S. territories, and three other countries. In 2010, more than 122,500 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the gardens were donated to neighborhood food pantries, kitchens, and shelters. The Department of Agriculture also has launched a People's Garden School Pilot Program to teach youngsters how to grow, tend, harvest, and prepare nutritious produce.



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Planting tomatoes