



## Thought for Food

### RETURN OF THE BACKYARD GARDEN

BY | MEREDITH TROTTA

IF THE IDEA OF starting a backyard vegetable garden both intrigues and intimidates, you are not alone. But fear not. Many horticultural enthusiasts with little or no gardening experience have become weekend farmers with great success. In other words, don't let clean nails and

uncalloused hands stand in the way of a green thumb. To borrow from Kevin Costner's playbook, "If you plant it, it will grow."

The desire for fresh, local produce is strong. Long seduced by shiny apples and tomatoes in the brightly lit aisles of retail super-

markets, many customers are now turning sour on imported produce, especially if it's not organically grown. Shipped in from around the world, many fruits and vegetables—replete with pesticides and/or preservatives—travel long distances by plane, train, or truck. As uneasiness grows about where and

how food is grown, many consumers are swarming to local farmers' markets to purchase purple peppers, heirloom tomatoes, and sweet corn—minus the bite of artificial additives. With few farms to meet the demand, however, the sensible solution is to grow your own.

The return of the backyard garden evokes fond nostalgia of simpler times. Local gardeners say that with proper planning, a laidback attitude, and some honest-to-goodness dirty work, a garden will not only grow but will provide a fun hobby for the family. Their sage advice is to start small, plan early, and keep it simple. And don't let the rawness of March fool you. Now is the perfect time to focus on the basics of sunlight, soil, and seeds.

The most important ingredient to a successful garden is sunlight. Your garden will require a minimum of six hours of sun a day, so finding the right location is crucial. Chart the direction of the sun as it rises and sets in your yard, accounting for the thickening foliage and lengthening days. Settle on a flat ten-foot-by-ten-foot parcel of land that will eventually be home to your fenced garden structure ("fenced" being the keyword—to keep burrowing and browsing foragers out of your Eden.) And don't forget that your garden needs to be within

# FROM | THE | FIELD

reach of your hose—Mother Nature is notoriously unreliable when it comes to watering.

As for the actual planting medium, it pays to invest in organic, weed-free soils, rich composts, and good old-fashioned manure for chemical-free peace of mind and great-tasting produce. Planting

in a simple raised bed made from straight boards screwed together is the choice of most gardeners because it provides excellent drainage, good aeration, and ample space for root systems, translating into better results. For quality soil, McEnroe Organic Farm in Millerton, New York, offers a variety

of products. (The Hickories in Ridgefield is one of their customers.) Cooper Mulch & More in Danbury also offers a good selection.

Once you have your bright patch of land and design plan, you can dig into the sexy part of gardening—seed selection. The best advice is to choose foods you enjoy

eating and ones that are easy to grow. To maximize your harvest in a small garden, plan on rotating crops throughout the season. Sugar snap peas, lettuces, radishes, and strawberries are all early-season crops. Once those are harvested, you can then plant mid-season favorites like squash, zucchini, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers. Late in the season plant broccoli, winter squash, potatoes, parsnips, or even pumpkins.

Seeds and seedlings are readily available locally through farms, nurseries, and garden-club plant sales. Seed catalogs are plentiful. White Flower Farm in Litchfield is a national leader in seed sales. If you are interested in growing unusual or rare varieties of vegetables, websites such as [seedsavers.org](http://seedsavers.org) and [johnnysseeds.com](http://johnnysseeds.com) offer organic and heirloom seeds—giving you biodiversity, not to mention great taste. Take the next few months to talk to people, explore online, and flip through seed catalogs for tips and ideas. Be open to the trial and error that gardening offers.

By the time spring is in full bloom you will be ready to put your backyard-garden plan into action. Before long, you'll not only be enjoying the taste of fresh produce, but the satisfaction that you grew it yourself.



News from....

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## Mulching Matters

Preparing your property for the new growing season often involves mulch. Done correctly, mulching offers many benefits such as control of weeds, moisture and erosion. Mulch stabilizes soil temperatures, minimizes compaction, and conditions the soil for improved fertility. It's also a buffer, preserving trees and shrubs from line trimmer damage.

There are a few important do's and don'ts to make the most of mulching. Follow these simple tips so your trees, shrubs and plantings will flourish and look fabulous.

### DON'T...

- Apply an overly thick layer of mulch which can prevent water penetration, increase soil compaction and inhibit gas exchange thereby suffocating a tree or shrub.
- Put too much mulch around plants since it promotes shallow, weak roots and can cause girdling roots.
- Pile mulch against the tree trunk or even worse cover part of it, as this holds in moisture, causing decay and attracting troublesome insects.



### DO...

- Apply only one inch to areas that were previously mulched and up to 3 inches for areas where mulch was not previously spread.
- Choose mulch that has been composted & preferably comprised of smaller matter.
- Leave a gap around tree trunks, bushes and stems so they can "breathe."
- Apply mulch one wheelbarrow at a time rather than dumping large piles.
- Remove old mulch if there is a build-up, before applying a fresh layer.

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