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Backyard gardens growing into urban farms

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Nearby traffic sounds from Sarasota's Main Street evaporate in Jodi John's backyard, where sprouts emerge from deep boxes of soil with peanuts, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, spinach, basil and other plants.

It is early September and the fall planting season is just beginning for John, who decided four months ago to take her garden to farm-like productivity levels.

She is among a growing number of urbanites rejecting manicured lawns for edible landscapes that feed the owners and their neighbors, and perhaps supply an occasional restaurant or food vendor.

With food and fuel prices soaring and recent scares over jalapenos and spinach, more people are looking to their own backyards for food, said Robert Kluson, an agricultural scientist with Sarasota County's extension office and the University of Florida's Small Farms and Alternative Enterprise Program.

Nationwide, urban farming's increasing popularity coincides with a rise in the number of farmers markets and a growing demand for eco-friendly products, organic foods and locally grown produce.

Last year, 150 people from around Southwest Florida attended Kluson's two-day workshop on small farming. Next year, he expects more.

"I like to call it the new face of agriculture. It's highly sustainable production on less land," Kluson said.



STAFF PHOTOS / ED PFUELLER

Jodi John shows rain water collected in an old orange juice tank outside her property on Laurel Road, where she is striving to live sustainably and grow food for her mother and tenants. Johns collects her own rain water for irrigation and is part of a growing trend of urban gardeners growing fruits and vegetables.

The look of urban agriculture

John lives on a downtown lot with two historic homes — one occupied by her mother — and a bungalow she rents out. Edible plants in large containers, colorful butterfly gardens and painted cisterns connected to garden hoses and irrigation tubes dominate the scenery between Laurel Road and the alley behind her property.

From the sidewalk between her house and her mother's, John bends over a planter to pluck a succulent climbing spinach leaf.

Behind her, a tiered tower of painted tires, lined and filled with soil, grows peanuts and sweet potatoes.

In her own yard, more planters await seeds, and in the back corner, a compost barrel and bins turn vegetable scraps and yard waste into soil.

John, and others sharing her philosophy, are driven by the desire to know exactly what they are putting in their mouths at dinnertime.

"It really pays to watch what you consume and try to live healthy, and I think the best way to be healthy is to grow your own food," John said.

An old tradition renewed

The United States has a history of turning to the backyard for food, particularly during wars and economic slumps.

From victory gardens planted during the world wars to inner city community gardens in 1970s, the idea of growing food close to home is not new.

In 1930s Punta Gorda, almost every home sported a backyard garden, said Vernon Peeples, a Florida native and local historian.

Convenience and modern agriculture in the latter 20th century helped to shift the urban yard from practical gardens to lawns and hedges.

But a handful of Southwest Floridians resisted. Today, they inspire the newcomers to urban farming.

Off Beneva Road in South Sarasota, a fruit-bearing jungle grows on two lots owned by John and Natividad Burns.

John Burns, 84, started planting in the 1970s after he found that eating lots of fruits and vegetables made him feel better. Later, he met Natividad, a younger woman with a very green thumb who had grown up on a coconut plantation in the Philippines.

The garden grew tall and wide, and in 2001 Burns bought the house next door and swiftly dug up the grass.

Now, both backyards burst with star fruits, papayas, avocados, sugar apples, bananas, coffee beans, cocoa, jackfruit, lychee, mango and rice.

Where most people would put a swimming pool, the couple built a fish pond. It teems with more than 100 tilapia that are sometimes harvested for dinner. A deck rising above the tree canopy and skirting the pool cage hosts lettuce, strawberries, beans and other sun-loving crops.

Curious people drop in almost daily and tours and growing tips are offered to those who are "serious" about growing.

"Gardening in Florida is not a science. It's a romance," Burns said.

A more entrepreneurial counterpart to Burns is Peter Burkard, who turned his suburban backyard into his family's primary income source 30 years ago.

Burkard, 54, grows vegetables on a 1.5-acre lot three miles east of Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport.

He keeps bees to pollinate his plants and make honey, raises chickens for eggs and natural fertilizer and shuns chemical pesticides.

"By not spraying you leave nature's balance intact," Burkard said.

Each Saturday morning, he loads his honey and produce in his truck and drives six miles south to the Sarasota Farmer's Market.

"From the time I was a late teenager, I knew I couldn't just be a cog in the wheel of society," Burkard said. "I had to make a living in a way that suited my values."

He is not afraid to share his growing tips or his place at the Farmer's Market.

For a 20 percent commission, Burkard also welcomes other growers to help make his table at the market more bountiful and diverse.

As long as it is organic, Burkard will sell anyone's excess, especially mango, avocado, lychee and citrus.

"It's a way to help me expand what I have," Burkard said. "I insist that everything that I sell, produce-wise, be both local and organic. That's going to mean periods of the year that I don't have much."

Lottie McNicol grew more heirloom tomatoes in her back yard off Bee Ridge Road last year than she knew what to do with. She sold about 30 young plants to Jodi

John and gave the rest away.

This year, recently laid off from her job as a bookkeeper, McNicol thinks it might be time to turn her edible landscape into an income source.

There is a new produce stand just a few blocks from her home.

"I would love to have a market garden in the backyard," McNicol said. "Up until now I haven't had enough time to do it."

For years, McNicol's backyard goal has simply been to plant only edibles – banana, key lime, avocado. She also grows crops in portable containers, including corn, beans, onion, cucumbers, herbs, peppers, okra, lettuce and arugula.

But heirloom tomatoes have become her passion and she has noticed that they have value beyond her own tastebuds.

"I've seen them in the grocery store selling for \$4.99 a pound," McNicol said.

Heirlooms are seed varieties that date back centuries. McNicol's favorite is the Cherokee purple, a robust, deep-colored tomato once cultivated by the Cherokee Indians.

For people like McNicol who have successfully produced much more than they can consume in their backyards, classes are offered locally on turning that bounty into profit.

Kluson offers year-round classes on urban growing and small farming. The next one is Wednesday and focuses on how to market produce and regulations governing food production.

But for most backyard growers the priority is growing healthy food.

"We need to be growing as much food as we can and not transporting it long distances. I'm not a fatalist. I don't think the world's going to end. I just think we need to take account for ourselves more," McNicol said.

FOR FLOURISHING CROPS, GET CREATIVE

Tasty tomato? Save the seeds

Lottie McNicol discovered the best tomatoes she had ever eaten at a roadside produce stand in North Carolina. They were an heirloom variety that sparked her interest in saving seeds to grow her own tomatoes.

Cherokee purple and Eva purple ball varieties both grow well in Florida.

Here is her trick:

Take all the seeds out of an especially delicious tomato and put them in a cup with water.

Let the seeds soak 2 to 3 days until they get a bit moldy.

Put the seeds in a strainer and rinse them well.

Place the seeds on a towel and let them dry.

Once they are completely dry, store them in a cool, dry place until you are ready to plant.

Tight space? Grow up

Jodi John did not have a lot of space for root crops like sweet potatoes and peanuts. So she built upward.

She created a sturdy wooden frame secured in the ground, using a post hole digger. Then she built a tree of triangular supports out of two-by-fours attached to the frame.

When attached, the triangles supported old tires that had been converted into planters.

To make planters out of the tires, she lined the open bottom with rigid plastic cut from the top of an old plastic barrel that had two 2-inch holes for drainage.

Any sturdy, impermeable material punctured with holes for drainage will work. Some alternatives include plywood lined with heavy-duty plastic bags or a sheet of thin concrete.

A deeper planter that does not require a lined bottom can also be made by stacking tires on top of each other and filling the circular center with soil.

No yard? Make one

Use planters to make an apartment or condominium porch into an urban garden.

Without spending much money, aspiring gardeners can make planters from buckets and other containers that could use a second life. McNicol fills old 5-gallon paint buckets with soil to grow potatoes.

Restaurants often dispose of large plastic barrels once filled with pickles or pepperoncinis. John slices them in half to make planters and also uses them to make rain barrels. For drainage, she fills the planters with rocks and covers them

with soil.

If money is no obstacle, then EarthBoxes are a good option. EarthBoxes are special planters with a few added features that produce high yields, said McNicol, who uses them to grow everything from beans to corn.

The special planters include a water reservoir at the bottom that allows plants to absorb water when they need it. They are useful in making sure plants are not too wet or dry. A plastic screen covering the top of the soil in the EarthBox also keeps unwanted water, weeds and pests out. Visit www.earthbox.com to learn more and find the dealer nearest you.

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