

# HOMEGROWN KNOW-HOW

Enjoy fresh veggies, herbs from your backyard



BY DEBBIE SWANSON

**W**hether you're a foodie who savors

ultra-fresh dining, an environmentalist concerned about the carbon footprint of food transport or a health-conscious consumer hungry for top-quality fruits and veggies, putting a priority on locally grown produce can help you make a change for the better.

And while farmers markets and farm-friendly supermarkets can be great resources for fresher produce, you can bring the "farm-to-table" movement home by establishing a garden in your own backyard.

From urban balcony to country estate, there's always room to grow some of your own food. Your harvest can be as simple as a few items to liven up your lunchtime salad or so expansive that you're doling out zucchini to the neighbors.

Let your space, energy level and taste preferences lead the way! »

THINKSTOCK



**BOX YOURSELF IN**

Raised-bed gardens — essentially large planting boxes that sit directly on the ground — are popular and lend an organized look to your landscape. The bed frames vary depending on your space and design, but are commonly between 3 feet and 4 feet wide, 5 feet and 8 feet long, and 6 inches to 12 inches high.

The frames are filled with soil, organic matter and other planting material that you provide.

Raised beds maximize productivity in a small space and keep rich soil in planting areas instead of pathways, says

John Forti, director of horticulture at the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. “They can also be helpful around old homes or urban streets where lead paint or other toxins might be present in the soil.”

And because they’re above ground, the beds require less bending and are more likely to accommodate gardeners who aren’t ready to let mobility issues slow them down.

Since they sit directly on the soil, raised beds allow for more variety than a container; depending on their depth, they can accommodate deeply burrowing carrots or 10-foot staked bean plants. (Before you establish a raised bed, consider tilling or “double digging” suitable hard-packed ground underneath to make it easier for some plants to take root.)

You can easily build bed frames from a kit, or create a frame to complement your home’s style using wood (such as landscape timbers or railroad ties), brick or masonry. Fill walkways between the beds with mulch or gravel to keep them neat, functional and weed-free.

**Raised beds** lend organization and visual interest to backyard gardens.

**WORK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE**

You don’t have to tear up your lawn to create a dedicated garden and achieve a route to a homegrown salad.

“Foodscaping” — incorporating edible plantings into your existing landscape — can provide a direct connection from seed to table, says Forti.

“Start off by adding attractive and nutritious plants into your existing perennial borders, annual beds, ornamental planters and window boxes,” he suggests. “The closer to your kitchen, the more likely you will be to remember (what you planted)

and harvest what you grow.”

To add visual interest, go for contrasting heights, colors and textures.

For budding gardeners who have little more than a small patio or balcony, compact vegetables and many herbs will thrive in containers. Choose ones that can withstand moisture and provide drainage.

Container plantings can be clustered at varying heights in sunny corners, staggered along stairs, or hung from sturdy hooks.

Create groupings of family favorites: basil, tomatoes and oregano for pizza, or cilantro and hot peppers to jazz up Southwestern dishes. »



**Gardening experts suggest** adding window boxes to grow herbs that you will routinely use in your kitchen.

**GO TRADITIONAL**

In-ground gardens are always a favorite. Choose your spot by observing the sun's pattern over several days or weeks.

"Some crops, such as leafy vegetables and small herbs, can tolerate some shade, but most plants need full sun," says Meagan Provencher, senior landscape designer at Wasco Nursery and Garden Center in St. Charles, Ill.

For proper drainage, choose a level area. Sketch out your plan, making note of your desired veggies' space requirements.

And don't limit your planting to a horizontal plane. "Vining fruits such as cucumbers, beans and zucchini can be grown on fence sections or trellises to keep them upright rather than hogging ground space," adds Provencher.

**EXTEND GROWING TIMES**

Depending on your budget and region, protective structures can stretch both ends of your growing season, providing an early start for seedlings and a shelter for that late-summer crop of cool-weather vegetables.

The most permanent structure is a greenhouse, which often includes a climate control mechanism such as a heater or ventilation system. Local building or electrical permits may be required.

Other affordable methods, Forti says, include a cold frame — a large, box-shaped planter sporting a flip-top glass or clear plastic lid — or a hoop house, which consists of sturdy plastic stretched over a frame of large hoops or bows. Both are easy DIY projects and draw upon solar power to warm plants. ●



*Make your harvest last year-round*

You don't have to limit your homegrown enjoyment to the summer months.

► Most vegetables are well suited to **canning**. "Cucumbers lend themselves to making pickles, as do beets, okra, summer squash and zucchini. Put together some dill flowers and green beans, and you get 'dilly beans,'" suggests Guy Kilpatric, lead agricultural technician at the University of Maryland's Terp Farm.

► **Freezing** is another season-extender — diced herbs, berries, peas and

beans are good candidates for the freezer. The defrosted items are often of similar quality to the original, but if you notice a change in texture, use them in casseroles or stews. Experiment to see how different items freeze and what your family prefers. "A favorite of mine is turning just about anything green into pesto to freeze for a quick, fresh-tasting pasta meal anytime," says Kilpatric.

► Some vegetables can be **stored, unprocessed**, for long periods in a refrigera-

tor or root cellar, Kilpatric notes. Cole crops, such as cabbage, turnips or Brussels sprouts, and root vegetables, including potatoes, beets and carrots, are typically long-lastors.

► Herbs, tomatoes and hot peppers take on a new purpose when **dried or dehydrated**. The drying process can be as simple as hanging a bunch of peppers in a dry, dark corner or as extensive as purchasing a dehydrator and dedicating an afternoon to creating your own sun-dried tomatoes.

— Debbie Swanson