

Planning a garden



JOE VARN
ACROSS THE FENCE

Some garden vegetables can be grown abundantly in most areas of South Carolina with proper care. Many who have grown vegetables for the excellent fresh flavor or as a hobby now find home gardening profitable with today's high food costs.

The number of home vegetable gardeners is steadily increasing in the state. Success or failure of home vegetable production can depend on many things, but some major reasons for failure are negligence, not following the proper instructions and not keeping up with current vegetable developments.

■ Planning

When planning a garden, it is important to ask a few basic questions:

- Who will be doing the work? Will the garden be a group project with family members or friends who will work willingly through the season to a fall harvest, or will you be handling the hoe alone in between camping and swimming? Remember that a small weed-free garden will produce more than a large, weedy mess.

- What do you and your family like to eat? Although the pictures in the garden catalog look delicious, there is no value in taking up gardening space with vegetables that no one eats. Make a list of your family's favorite vegetables, ranked in order of preference. This will be a useful guide in deciding how much of each vegetable to plant. Successive plantings of certain crops, such as beans, can be harvested over a longer period of time and increase your yield. As you plan, list recommended varieties and planting dates.

- How do you plan to use the produce from your garden? If you plan to can, freeze, dry or store part of the produce, this will be a factor not only in planning the size of the garden but also in selecting varieties. Some varieties have much better keeping quality than others. Care should be used in choosing the seeds, making sure the varieties you select are adapted to your area and intended use.

- * Finally, how much space is available? How much area can be converted into usable garden space, and how much garden do you need? Do not plant more garden than you need.

■ Site selection

The garden should be as small as possible to cut down on unnecessary work. In South Carolina, gardens should receive at least six hours of direct sun each day. Leafy vegetables can tolerate partial shade; vegetables that produce fruit, such as peppers and tomatoes, must be grown in full sun.

Avoid planting your garden

close to or beneath trees and shrubs because shade and the competition for nutrients and water may reduce vegetable growth. If a garden must be planted near trees, reserve the sunniest spot for vegetables grown for their fruit or seeds.

Plants grown for their leaves or roots can be grown in partial shade. Because water is required by vegetables, especially during droughty periods, a site within close proximity to the house should be considered; this site is usually located close to an abundant water supply. Also, people are more likely to work in the garden and check for pests when the garden is close to the house.

When soil or landscape space is unavailable, vegetables can be grown in containers. As long as light, water and soil volume requirements are met, container-grown vegetables can be placed anywhere: sidewalks, patios, window boxes, porches or balconies. More information on vegetable gardening in containers is available in Container Vegetable Gardening, HGIC 1251.

Sloping areas are satisfactory if managed properly. Contour the rows to the shape of the slope (plant around the hill). Construct terraces if erosion results even with contoured planting.

Gardeners with poorly drained or steeply sloped sites can improve their sites through the use of raised beds. A permanent raised bed can be created with used cross ties, concrete blocks or similar rot-resistant material. The completed form can then be filled with a mixture of good topsoil and compost. Permanent raised beds are easy to maintain, and require less effort to control weeds and overcome poor soil or site problems. Raised beds can be any size, but narrow beds (about 3 to 4 feet wide) will allow the gardener to reach the center of the bed without stepping into the bed. More information on raised beds is available in Raised Beds, HGIC 1257.

■ Season of planting

To determine when to plant cool and warm-season vegetables in South Carolina, refer to Home and Garden Information Brochure HGIC 1256.

Excerpted from the South Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual, EC 678.

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Consumers are beginning to fight higher food costs by growing own

By **DEAN FOSDICK**
For The Associated Press

Americans finding soaring food prices hard to stomach are battling back by growing their own food.

Home vegetable gardens appear to be booming as a result of the twin movements to eat local and pinch pennies. Although the 2008 planting season is still largely in the planning stages, it appears vegetable seed sales will be up significantly from year-ago figures, said Barb Melera, president of D. Landreth Seed Co., in New Freedom, Pa.

"I just came back from the Southeastern Flower Show in Atlanta and we sold three- to four times the amount of seed packets we did the previous year," Melera said. "This is the first time I've ever heard people say 'I can grow this more cheaply than I can buy it in the supermarket.' That's a 180-degree turn from the norm."

Roger Doiron, a gardener and fresh food advocate from Scarborough, Maine, said he turned \$85 worth of seeds into more than six months of vegetables for his family of five.

"We're closing in on mid-February and we still have several quarts of tomato sauce, bags of mixed vegetables and ice-cube trays of pesto in the freezer; 20 heads of garlic, a five-gallon crock of sauerkraut, more homegrown hot pepper sauce than one family could comfortably eat in a year and three sorts of squash, which we make into soups, stews and bread," he said.

As founding director of Kitchen Gardeners International, a nonprofit group promoting home gardening and healthier food, Doiron pays close attention to pocketbook issues. Food prices, gasoline prices and oil prices are all up sharply compared to a year ago, making it more challenging to put a meal on the table, Doiron said.

"I see home gardens as a way of broadening and democratizing the local foods revolution which until now has been more of an upper-class phenomenon," he said by e-mail. "Home gardening allows people to



AP FILE

The spring planting season starts early for this homeowner, who has just assembled a three-tiered seedling cart to get his vegetables growing at a home in New Market, Va. Americans finding soaring food prices hard to stomach are battling back by growing their own food in home vegetable gardens.

have their fresh, organic salad greens and pay for them, too."

At \$3.80 a gallon, whole milk cost more through November of last year than the \$2.99 average for unleaded gas, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and AAA.

Egg prices were 19.5 percent higher in June of 2007 than they were the previous June, the U.S. Department of Labor said. Over that same period, the cost of whole milk rose 13.3 percent, fresh chicken was up 10 percent, apples 11.7 percent, dried beans 11.5 percent and white bread 9.6 percent.

And the worst may be yet to come. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization said retail

prices would continue to climb as more agricultural crops, primarily corn, are processed into biofuels. Greater demand from India and China also are contributing to what likely will be long-term food cost increases, the agency said.

Those conditions are ripe for an increase in gardening, said Rose Hayden-Smith, a garden educator and historian with the University of California-Davis.

"You always see an uptick in gardening activity in keeping with economic conditions — consumer-driven waves that emulate recession and inflation-driven economies," Hayden-Smith said.

Hayden-Smith compares the

current period of market uncertainty with that of the early- to mid-20th century when the concept of "victory gardens" became popular in the U.S., Canada and Europe.

"A lot of companies during the world wars and the Great Depression era encouraged vegetable gardening as a way of addressing layoffs, reduced wages and such," she said in a telephone interview. "Some companies, like U.S. Steel, made gardens available at the workplace. Railroads provided easements they'd rent to employees and others for gardening."

During World War II, gardens were pitched as an important part of the war effort — by war's end, the victory gardens were turning out 40 percent of the nation's produce, freeing up big farms to supply the troops. And they were important at home in a time of rising food prices and rationing, the Kitchen Gardeners' Doiron said.

"Home gardens made the difference between people being well fed and going to bed hungry," he said, adding that the gardens increased consumption of fruits and vegetables to historic highs.

Now, as then, gardeners are getting serious about what they're planting; the gardeners who Melera met at the recent trade show were not just interested in flowers or hobby plants.

"They came to me with things like, 'How can I maximize what I put into a small plot?'" she said. "They're beginning to think in the old-fashioned way about vegetable gardening not just being there for entertainment purposes. They need it to yield stuff."

Jim Gerritsen, co-owner of WoodPrairie Farm, a certified organic, family-run operation near Bridgewater, Maine, said his sales are up.

"This year, we're getting more questions tied into self-reliance," he said. "We're hearing new gardens are being prepared for the first time, former gardeners are coming back to the garden and existing gardens are being enlarged."

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How to get luscious fruits no matter what size your yard — space the plants properly

By **LEE REICH**
For The Associated Press

Fruits splashed all over the pages of nursery catalogs look as enticing now as they could taste in summer, so long as you don't bite off more than you can chew.

When planning what fruits to grow, make sure every plant has enough elbow room. A strawberry plant needs its one square foot of space and a full-size apple tree needs its 500 square feet. That space is needed to let every leaf bask in sun and bathe in breezes and so nourish plentiful and tasty fruits.

Just how far apart to set plants depends, of course, on how big they'll grow. The richness of your soil and your fertilizing, pruning, and watering all play a role. But the main determinant how big a plant will grow is its inherent, or natural, vigor.

■ Apples far from the tree

With some kinds of fruits, you can choose the inherent vigor of the plant you want, from dwarf to full size. A particular variety of fruit might grow on a naturally dwarf plant or it may be made dwarf by being grafted onto a special dwarfing rootstock.

Northblue, for example, is variety of blueberry that is naturally small, never growing more than a couple of feet high, while Bluecrop, another blueberry variety, is naturally larger, the bushes easily reaching six feet, or more, high.

Another example: A single variety of apple, such as McIntosh, might be borne on a full-size, 25-foot-high tree if grafted on one rootstock, a 15-foot tree if grafted on a semi-dwarfing rootstock, or only a six foot high tree if grafted on a dwarfing rootstock. In this case, it is the rootstock, not McIntosh's genetics, that determines eventual size.

McIntosh fruits will taste identical from any of these trees. But the Northblue fruits are different from the Bluecrop fruits.

■ Bigger not always better

With fruit trees, an advantage



AP

Fruits, such as these net-covered strawberries, splashed all over the pages of nursery catalogs look as enticing now as they could taste in summer. But don't bite off more than you can chew. When planning what fruits to grow, make sure every plant has enough elbow room.

of dwarf over full-size is that they are easier to care for. You can do most or all your pruning, harvesting and other work with both feet on terra firma.

Smaller plants are also just the ticket for smaller yards. And whatever the size of your backyard, you can cram in more small plants than large plants. So instead of six bushels of fruit from one large McIntosh tree, you could harvest a couple of bushels each of Spigold, Mutsu, Gavenstein, and Macoun apples from four dwarf trees occupying the same space as that single large tree. Not only do you get more variety in apples, but, because small trees use sunlight more efficiently than large trees, you actually harvest more total

apples.

Or, you could expand your palette and your harvest season by planting a couple of dwarf apples, dwarf peaches, and dwarf plums in that same space.

Still, one full-size tree better suit your needs if you enjoy cooking up and canning a big batch of applesauce all at once. Generally, large trees also tolerate drought, poor fertility and other adverse soil conditions better than dwarf trees.

With age, a large tree develops a majestic quality and provides shade and limbs for climbing. And besides, for some kinds of fruits, you have no choice.

■ And the numbers are ...

Space large fruit trees at least

20 feet apart, medium-sized trees 15 feet apart, and small ones eight feet apart. If you plant more than a row of trees, allow more spacing between rows. Only half these distances are needed for planting adjacent to a wall or fence.

Give bush fruits six foot spacing, except for strawberries and red raspberries, which need one and two-foot spacing, respectively. Blueberries and currants make attractive, edible hedges, in which case you could set plants as close as four feet apart to let them form a continuous row of plants. Consider lining a walkway with such a hedge, and you can graze as you walk.

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