

VILLAGE VIEW

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Lengthening, warmer days, give gardeners thoughts of their land. We dream of neat rows of tender leaf lettuce, of dark-green ruffles that are spinach, and see ourselves pulling rosy red or ice-white radishes from the earth. These are early summer crops.

We envision, for later harvest, tall tomato plants, heavy with crimson fruit; see sprawling vines hiding swelling green cucumbers beneath their foliage; think of golden squash blossoms yielding butter-yellow goodness. Bell peppers come to mind, hanging their great green globes on every bush.

Such thoughts are reinforced by prices posted at market vegetable bins.

From farms in warmer climes ring anguished cries. In both California and Florida, this past winter's rains flooded fields and drowned new-planted crops. Four, sometimes five plantings have been attempted. Seeds rotted, or if they sprouted, the seedlings' roots smothered as ground water levels rose to unprecedented heights. Supplies can't meet demands. Prices rise.

To help ease pressures on food budgets, we determine to grow our own vegetables. Rewards are deeper than financial ones: a first-time gardener reaps more than edibles, more than savings. Experienced ones will vouch for that.

A few dollars' worth of seed and some long hours of labor bring amazing results. Blistered palms soon heal, are forgotten and forgiven, when, as short weeks pass, the garden's bounty arrives on the table. Purists among gardeners promise more: an inner satisfaction like no other.

Backyard growers, this year, will have plenty of company. Nearly half this nation's households grow food for home consumption. Countrywide, gardeners spent 2.5 billion dollars for gardening supplies and services last year; they produced 18 billion dollars' worth of food.

Break those figures down to your own situation: could you get better return on any investment than putting \$2.50 down and collecting \$18, four or five months later?

While it's true no estimate of value is put on work and time also invested, are the hours and energy a garden demands more productively used otherwise? Not if you're a purist among gardeners.

As even the most enthusiastic grubber will confirm, beginning a garden is extremely hard work. Digging is not fun. But spading up a patch of ground is somehow satisfying . . . as each shovelful of earth is turned, the soil seems to breathe steamy goodness. Spadeful by spadeful, your garden takes shape and, when the last hummock of weed and tussock of grass lie buried beneath fresh plowed ground, the worst is done.

This chore is for purists. Those who cannot or prefer not to dig may call a tilling service. Machines, in an hour, make short work of what takes a man with a shovel half a day to accomplish.

If you've been composting kitchen wastes this winter, incorporate all that goodness into your soil. Spread a thick layer over the plowed ground. Should you have a heap of seaweed rotting in a corner, throw that, too, on top. And rotted cow manure if you can get some. And a hod or two of wood ashes. Now rake it in, mixing all together.

Then let it rest a few weeks. If it doesn't rain, hose it down now and then. While you wait, of course, you decide what you will grow.

When the day comes that you pick up a handful of soil and squeeze it, and it neither oozes between your knuckles in a muddy tea, nor drifts away like a handful of flour, but instead, has a fluffy soft texture that holds together but also separates easily, you'll give the surface one final raking before sowing seeds or setting out seedlings.

Plant radishes, lettuce, and spinach early. As these cool-weather seeds sprout, thin to give each plant room to spread. If the thinnings are two to three inches high, use them in salads. After harvesting fully-developed plants, fill the spaces they leave with cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, beans. Choose vegetables your family likes best to eat.

Weeds, too, will grow. A few minutes' attention each day will control those in a small garden. While weeding, you watch progress your plants make from day to day. Overnight, vegetables put out new shoots, thicken in stem, make blossoms, set fruit that soon swells to succulent maturity. Each, as the season progresses, takes on individuality.

The only thing better than harvesting home-grown food is eating it.

Perhaps you're so far removed from being a purist in your garden that, although you love home-grown tomatoes, you are truly short of time or simply prefer easier methods. Or maybe the feeling of grains of sandy soil under your fingernails gives you shudders.

In this case, you may want to attempt a lazier trick or two. Experiment: purchase six tomato plants at a nursery and transplant, one to a basket, into half a dozen bushel baskets filled with a mixture of shavings and sawdust. If you water them twice daily, and pour liquid fertilizer around the base of each plant three times a week, you can grow enough tomatoes this summer to keep four people eating them twice a day from the last of July until frost kills the plants.

Hate digging, raking, and weeding? Despise the idea of needing to keep track of a fertilizing schedule? Experiment: Buy plastic bags of potting soil. Punch holes in the bottom for drainage, tuck a seedling into each bag through a slit cut in the plastic opposite the drainage holes. Keep the soil moist. If your mini-gardens tend to dry out, bank with sand or a mixture of earth, leaves and grass clippings.

This method adds considerable cost to your investment, of course. Sterilized potting soil sold in bags isn't inexpensive, but you may find yourself so entranced with your success that, next season, you'll be tempted to try a real garden.

Just in case you might, begin composting immediately. To start, spread a sheet of plastic on the ground and make a few holes in it, a foot or so apart. Throw onto it everything that goes through your kitchen that you don't eat except paper, metal, and meat and bones. Toss in weeds, lawn clippings, leaves, toadstools, fruit skins, peelings, whatever. Now and then throw on some sane to help keep down the flies. As your harvesting proceeds, add roots and trimmings from the garden, and spent plants as they die back in the fall. And if you did grow vegetables in bagged potting soil or tomatoes in sawdust, add that material to your heap.

A year from now, you'll have the most marvelous additive for your garden, the one you are certain to want to attempt now that you, too, have been converted to gardening. You might even become a purist!