Grow It: Planting a Food Garden

Sherry Rodeheaver, Special to News Post

The next time you pick up that bag salad at the grocery store and lament its wilted contents, consider this: that bag has travelled an average of 1500 miles from "field to fork". At today's diesel prices, that is about $512 in fuel to get it here. So, not only is it expensive, but the end product has often lost its appeal by the time it hits the supermarket shelves. What to do? Why not grow your own food garden and have delicious, fresh produce for 6 to 9 months of the year?

Before beginning, remember that a little planning goes a long way toward success. How much space is required? What should I plant? Start small and leave room for expansion. An 8 ft X 8 ft garden can yield up to $175-300 of fresh produce in one season! No space for a garden? You can plant in containers on a deck or patio that receives at least 6 hours a day of direct sunlight. Plant what you like to eat. There are many tasty, easy-to-grow vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, beans, lettuce and leafy greens such as kale and chard.

Now that you have a plan, think about the four S's of food gardening: Site, Soil, Seeds and Sustainability.

Site:
The placement of your garden is as important as what you grow in it. Chose a location that is fairly level to minimize water/soil/nutrient runoff. Be sure to have a water source close by, as having to carry water may end your budding career as a food gardener. Southern exposure is best, to ensure plants get plenty of sunlight. Rabbits, groundhogs deer and other animals can seriously affect your crop yields, so you may want to put a fence around your garden. A good barrier, a fence also acts as a trellis for plants needing support, such as beans and peas.

Soil:
Here in our region we have clay, which is heavy and drains poorly. Soil can be improved by the addition of organic matter such as compost, farmyard manure, shredded leaves and chemical-free grass clippings. A sample should be obtained to determine the exact composition of your garden soil. The University of Connecticut offers a complete soil test for about $8 which includes lead testing, a must for any garden where food will be grown. Visit their website at www.soiltest.uconn.edu for more information.

Seeds:
Choose seeds that are packaged for the current growing season. Follow directions on seed packet for optimum results. Once plants come up, remember to thin them as directed. It is hard to 'waste' plants, but ultimately you will have a better crop if the remaining plants are given adequate room to grow. Buying transplants gives your garden a jump start, but be sure to purchase only healthy plants without signs of disease or pests.

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Sustainability:
Nitrogen is the element which gives plants their dark green color and stimulates rapid growth. "Meals" (fish, cottonseed, alfalfa) are good nitrogen sources and may be used as soil supplements. When using fertilizer, follow the instructions on the label, and apply to the soil around the base of the plant to prevent leaf burn. Soaker hoses and drip systems are highly recommended. They minimize water use and deliver water slowly to the root system. Cover the hoses with mulch to prevent evaporation. Weeds are inevitable, but use of mulch and a little elbow grease can keep them manageable.

For more information please visit the Home and Garden Information Center at hgic.umd.edu and click on the "Grow it, Eat it" logo.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.

GROW IT EAT IT
Maryland's Food Gardening Network