

NOT TOO LATE TO START YOUR OWN SUMMER VEGGIE GARDEN!

Master gardener William Moss (<http://wemoss.org>) showed how, on The Early Show on Wednesday, June 17, 2009 -- from the plants to choose (including kid-compatible ones) to the actual planting and tending, to small-space gardening and harvesting. His tips could help give you a green thumb and help keep more green in your wallet!:

Which vegetables? Beans, okra, squash, melons, tomatoes, peppers, an assortment of herbs,

Cost savings of seeds vs seedlings. How much? - Depends on which veggie and how much space you have. Beans, okra, squash, and other melons are typically started from seed. And the savings is tremendous. A pack of seeds could provide you with bushels of beans, if you had the space. Tomatoes and peppers take a long time to grow from seed and are usually bought as plants. Herbs can be bought as either. More cost effective to grow from seeds but you can start harvesting herbs bought as plants right away.

Moss' site, wemoss.org , has a lot of stuff on veggies, including Kitchen Gardening (http://wemoss.org/topicks/kitchen_gardening/index.html) and Best Management Practices (http://wemoss.org/education/nres/best_management_practices.html). Some of his articles about veggies include: An Original Urban Gardener (http://www.garden.org/urbangardening/index.php?page=september_original), Container Veggie Gardening (<http://www.garden.org/urbangardening/index.php?page=container-veg>), and Share The Harvest (http://www.garden.org/urbangardening/index.php?page=october_harvest)

FROM WILLIAM MOSS'S WEBSITE AND OTHER SOURCES:

Moss' Kitchen Garden Plants

Gardening for the Table

Summer is the season for growing crops and herbs. Producing your own food (however minute) lifts the spirits and encourages the soul. On the practical side, growing some crops boosts your nutrition, sharpens culinary skills, and keeps you in touch with nature.

Most of us can't expect to be self-sufficient with our gardening. That's okay we enjoy visiting the friendly folks at the farmer's market. But sometimes you need a sprig of fresh parsley, some thyme clippings, or a vine ripe tomato. That's where the kitchen garden can save the day.

Whether you have a large space or just a few balcony containers all you need is sunshine, clean soil, and healthy plants/seeds. Mulching is also a good idea. The list below features some easy plants that will grow right outside your kitchen door (as long as there is enough sun). You only need a plant or two of these guys to keep you happy all summer.

Basil

Bushy annual with fragrant leaves. Tender to frost. Purple Thai basil is less pungent with a hint of anise.

Pesto, flavoring in sauces

Hyssop

Hardy sub-shrub with aromatic leaves. Flowers all summer. Fantastic for attracting pollinators to the garden. Drought tolerant. Cut back after flowering to promote bushiness and limit volunteers. flavoring, salads, cough syrup, liquers, perfumes

Okra

Large annual with bright flowers that last a day. Pick pods when they are less than 6" to avoid toughness. Drought tolerant. "Burgundy" is a colorful cultivar. "Louisiana Green Velvet" can grow to over 9'.

Raw, fried, gumbos, thickener in soup

Parsley

Decorative groundcover with fragrant leaves. Biennial flowers the following spring. Drought tolerant. Attracts swallowtails.
Flavoring, garnish, breath freshener, digestive aid

Pepper

Mid sized to large perennial often grown as an annual. Banana peppers and chile peppers usually produce more for the home gardener than bell types. Drought tolerant.
Raw, sauteed, salads, dishes

Sage

Hardy sub-shrub with aromatic leaves. Flowers in late spring. Prune out old woody stems to promote new, fresh growth. Drought tolerant. Clipped stems can be used fresh or dried. Great seasoning in sausage.
Seasoning, flavoring, sauces,

Squash

Large annual creeping plant. A couple of plants may be needed to ensure pollination. Winter squash can also be used like summer squash if harvested early.
Soups, roasted, steamed, dishes

Sweet Potato

Running vine that produces roots and taters from leaf axils. Taters can be harvested early by "robbing" developing roots. These early taters do not store well. Drought tolerant.
Soups, dishes, souffles, pies, candied

Thyme

Hardy, low growing, aromatic groundcover. Some are strictly creepers. Cut back bareen twigs in spring to promote new growth
Seasoning, sauces, flavoring

Tomato Large perennial grown as an annual in temperate climates. Weak stems require support. Cherry tomatoes, like "Sun Gold", are great choices for urban gardeners. Tomatoes occasionally attract hornworms which attract parasitic wasps. Raw, salads, sauces, dishes, roasted

Best Management Practices

July 9 , 2008

Best Management Practices (BMP) help to grow healthy, productive plants.

Use clean tools and gloves when handling crops

Clean pruners before using them on different plants

Maintain a healthy soil by recycling nutrients and organic matter. Crop residue (unusable leaves, dead plants, stems, etc.) is composted and added to soil.

Maintain soil nutrient and pH levels at an optimal range

Maintain soil moisture at optimum levels for plant growth without water runoff.

Apply approved fertilizers so that nutrients are available when the crops need them. For example, apply fertilizer to corn in spring so that nutrients are available for the growing seedling. Do not add fertilizer to corn after the ear has been harvested. Nutrients are not needed then, and the fertilizer will be wasted.

Rotate crops into different fields every season. This keeps pests and diseases from finding the same plant in the same place every year. It also keeps the crops from exhausting the same nutrients from the same field each year.

Plant more than one type of crop (polyculture). Polyculture is insurance against one crop failing and ruining the entire harvest.

Monitor for pest, and use biological and mechanical means of pest control if possible. Mechanical - handpicking, spraying off with hose, blowing off with air. Biological - use of good insects or bacteria to fight the bad ones.

Carl Walton: An Original Urban Gardener

Carl Walton (left) was generous with his harvest and his time when yours truly came to visit. Urban gardening and sustainable gardening are "hot" right now. But some people have been practicing both for decades. On the west side of Chicago lives one such pioneer. Carl Walton planted his garden in 1970, soon after arriving from Mississippi. The garden is not expansive, just an average city lot of about half an acre, including the house. For Walton, being "green" is common sense. Sustainable gardening, which limits inputs and outputs, is both productive and cost-effective.

Walton will be 90 years old on October 8th. You would never guess it. His warm face, encyclopedic memory, firm handshake, and fashionable leather sandals are more typical of a man decades younger. Gardening keeps him young. He states, "It's my daily exercise. That's why I am still here. Most people my age are gone, either dead or in a nursing home." He also credits daily doses of a homemade concoction of pokeweed, mint, sage, garlic, and honey for keeping him vigorous. I'll have to trust him on that one.

Abundance on a City Lot

From the street, Walton's modest front yard, filled with arborvitaes, sunflowers, and impatiens, conceals a small urban farm. Make no mistake, this is a garden for producing food. The speckled butter beans were 7 feet high. Even though Walton had just harvested them all, the vines were still strong and green. As they fade, he will pull down the plants, till them into the soil, and sow collards for an autumn harvest.

He keeps his garden at peak production throughout the season, growing several varieties of tomatoes, beans, celery, eggplant, cucumbers, collards, mustard greens, turnip greens, kale, onions, garlic, pokeweed, sage, and mint. Fruits and nuts include a pear tree, peach trees, apple trees, grapevines, strawberries, a walnut sapling, and a thin-shelled pecan sapling.

Gigantic butter bean plants tower over Walton's grandkids.

The yard is packed. There is just enough room to maneuver through the rows of beans, tomatoes, pokeweed, and cucumbers. You have to squeeze under the grapevines to get to the back section of the garden. There, mustard and turnip seedlings are emerging near an apple tree. The only down time in Walton's garden is the middle of winter, and even then he can harvest onions.

Extra produce goes to the community. A stack of giveaway bags and rubber bands are a testament to his garden's bounty. My wife and I were not allowed to leave without taking a couple bags of food.

Walton loves flowers, too, and this is obvious from the bursts of color throughout the front and back yards. A magnolia tree, cannas, hardy hibiscus, cosmos, sedums, rose bushes, tiger lilies, ferns, datura, hollyhocks, violas, and bleeding hearts thrive there. He says I have to return in spring to admire all the early bloomers.

Old-Fashioned Know-How

Walton's uses methods that many of us consider to be part of a sustainable approach:

Using trash cans to collect rainwater from gutters. Once homemade cisterns are full, he redirects the gutters to water grapevines and peach trees.

Composting with grass clippings, plant debris, food scraps, fish guts, etc.

Building and enriching the soil by tilling in leaves, hulls, and other plant waste in autumn.

Using natural IPM methods (for instance, his cat helps protect the grapevines from marauders, and black pepper deters rabbits).

Collecting, saving, and planting seeds, even from his peach and apple trees. Walton buys meat, sugar, cooking oil, and a few other necessities, but his garden supplies all his produce, and he freezes much for the long Chicago winters. His garden also indirectly helps him get animal protein. Like most old-school gardeners, Walton seems to be a jack-of-all-trades, and that includes fishing and inventing. His homemade electric probe is used to shock worms from the wet ground. He takes those worms to Lake Michigan and other local fishing holes in search of bluegill, crappie, and catfish.

Walton's half-acre garden keeps food on the table or in the freezer year-round. I learned of another of his skills when he showed me his grape harvest. In a barrel most of the harvest was fermenting into wine. Truly, a man after my own heart! I could only smile at this Chicagoan making Concord grape wine (on top of everything else) from his little urban plot. The only wine-making secrets he revealed were yeast, sugar, and a wooden masher. But later he slyly took me inside and gave me a bottle of last year's brew, when my wife wasn't looking. I tried it when I got home and it was good. A little too sweet for me, so I cut it with some Chardonnay and sat on my rooftop contemplating this man's accomplishments.

Walton makes me reluctant to call myself an expert. He has been practicing sustainable gardening longer than my mother has been alive. Before I was born, he was already an accomplished urban gardener on the west side of Chicago. In these times, what's old is new again. Resource-conserving methods that date back to 19th-century Mississippi are in vogue. I feel honored to have been welcomed into his garden, and hope to eventually follow in his footsteps.

The man is a living testament to the benefits of urban gardening and proof that urbanites can live sustainably. But he would not call it sustainable gardening, permaculture, environmentalism, or any other "trendy" name. To him, his methods - saving seeds, collecting rainwater, composting, crop rotation with legumes, and enriching the soil - are simply the best way to garden. So here's to you, Mr. Walton, cheers
A Container Veggie Garden

Many types of peppers thrive in containers. Now is the time to plant crops for bountiful harvests this summer and fall. Even small-space gardeners can grow enough nutritious produce to prepare a few meals, supplement your diet, and save some bucks. With a little planning and attention, container gardens can produce like mini farms.

Almost any vessel can be used as a container, but it must have drainage holes that allow water to freely flow through the pot. Most veggies only need about 6 inches of soil depth. Trays and smaller containers work fine for lettuce, radishes, spinach, and peppers. Root crops like carrots and onions, and large plants like most tomatoes and squash, require half-barrels, grow bags, or some other large (larger than 16 inches in diameter) container. As a general rule, bigger is better for root growth and overall vigor.

When growing veggies in containers, packaged potting mixes are typically the best choice. Using garden soil in containers is never ideal. In urban areas where there is a potential for contamination, filling a container for edibles with city dirt is out of the question. Packaged potting mixes are lightweight, moisture retentive, and well aerated. Plus they do not harbor any fungi, bacteria, insects, or weed seeds that would cause problems later.

Where to Grow?

Sunlight - not space - is probably the biggest limiting factor in urban environments. Without at least six hours of sun a day, it's going to be tough to grow quality veggies. Crops need a lot of solar energy to make nutritious fruits, seeds, and leaves. Southern exposure is best, but six hours

from any direction should be sufficient. To avoid leaning or uneven growth, rotate the containers weekly.

Wind exposure is another factor to consider. To prevent desiccation and damage from the wind tunnel effect, urban gardeners should place large plants in sheltered locations. Avoid narrow alleys or any other spots where wind is funneled directly towards the plants. If the only options are exposed balconies and terraces, use wire cages or other sturdy supports to protect large plants like tomatoes, beans, peas, and squash.

Mix veggies and flowers for an ornamental edible garden in a pot.

Container Veggies Need Attention

Regular watering is crucial when you grow in containers because there's limited soil mass for storing water. During the peak of summer heat, gardeners may need to water daily to keep plants growing at full potential. A drip irrigation system allows you to water automatically, and with a timer you can even water containers when you're away. However, the best option for vacation watering is always a reliable neighbor. (And if they happen to be a master gardener, then your karma's working overtime!)

Vegetables grown in containers also need regular fertilizing. Follow the label instructions and make sure the container is well drained or plants may suffer from high salt levels due to fertilizer buildup. Some gardeners combine the two tasks and simply water with a quarter-strength fertilizer solution once a week.

If plants don't appear vigorous and healthy, check them closely because disease and pest infestations can quickly get out of hand. If caught early, most are easy to treat. Check the undersides of leaves for insects. Many of them can be picked off or sprayed off with a strong stream of water. Some pests require other treatments. Natural insecticides and biological controls (ladybugs, parasitic wasps, predatory midges, etc.) are very popular with home gardeners. Always read the label to make sure the product is compatible with food crops, and follow the directions carefully.

Getting Off to a Good Start

Try growing grape tomatoes in a half-barrel with bamboo stakes for support. When selecting plants, look for vigorous young seedlings with bushy growth. Plants that are lanky or already flowering are not good choices. Check to make sure each seedling is securely anchored in the six-pack or pot, which implies a well-established root system. Dip the seedling in a bucket of water to moisten the rootball, tease out any circling roots, and plant it at the same depth it was previously growing. (Tomatoes are an exception because they can be planted with the bare stem several inches below the ground and roots will form along the stem.)

Some crops, like lettuce, beets, and carrots, are best grown from seed. Simply follow the instructions on the packet. Be sure to thin sprouts to the recommended spacing. Thinning is a ruthless task, but fortunately most veggie sprouts can be used in salads and other dishes for an early-season treat.

Varieties for Small Spaces

The crops and varieties listed below are good choices for containers. Because of the rising popularity of container gardening, many more options are appearing every year. Check your local garden centers, farmers' markets, and botanic gardens for the newest varieties.

Beans: 'Bush Romano', 'Bush Blue Lake', 'Royal Burgundy', 'Blue Lake'

Carrots: 'Danvers Half Long', 'Tiny Sweet', 'Little Finger', 'Thumbelina'

Chard: most varieties

Cucumbers: 'Patio Pick', 'Salad Bush Hybrid', 'Early Pik'

Eggplant: 'Slim Jim', 'Ichiban', 'Black Beauty', 'Mordon Midget'

Lettuce: leaf varieties

Onions: 'Japanese Bunching', 'Beltsville Bunching'

Peppers: 'Sweet Banana', 'Cayenne', 'Yolo Wonder', 'Jalapeno', 'Thai Hot', 'Keystone Resistant'

Spinach: most varieties

Squash: 'Scalopini', 'Early Yellow Summer', 'Gold Rush'

Tomatoes: 'Patio VF', 'Sungold', 'Early Girl', 'Sweet 100 Patio', 'Saladette', 'Tiny Tim', 'Pixie II', and most determinant varieties.