

STARTER GARDEN

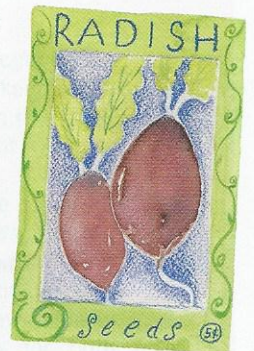


Only those who live down grow.

—William H. Gass,
*In the Heart of the
Heart of the Country*

For some of us, the dream of planting a garden occupies a place in our imaginations next to touring Europe by train and learning another language—it is more a desire than a dream; less a plan than a longing. Gardening would make us feel clean and good and useful. We would realize certain truths about ourselves while casting about in the soil. We would have lessons from the moon and rain and the position of the sun, and we would take no small pleasure in the scent of freshly turned earth, in the sweet smell of a ripe carrot.

It is easy to romanticize the dream of gardening—there are no aphids in dreams, no extended frosts—but gardens are certain commitments, the care of which require foresight and preparation and energy. In a nutshell, work. Gardens are unforgiving in their way and will govern your backyard with all of the subtlety of a summer drought. Coaxing a vegetable garden from the sandy square you've reserved in your backyard may seem a formidable task, but take heart. Growing veggies in Florida is a fruitful experience if you know when to start. If you've never had the visceral pleasure of plucking your own tomatoes from the vine or snipping, with your kitchen scissors, fresh Mexican tarragon from the pot on your stoop, it's time to get acclimated.



Consider July the month during which you plant ideas about your garden and not the thing itself. "Here, fall vegetable gardening really takes off at the end of September, just as the rainy season is ending, says Barb Litterer, of the Sarasota Garden Club. So what can you do in late summer? Everything else. Evaluate your soil, scan seed catalogues, think about what you like to eat and begin prep work.

"This is the time to build raised beds if you need to and to select an area for the garden that gets lots of sun," says Patricia Porchey, urban horticulturist with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) extension in Sarasota. Most veggies need a good six hours of sun a day. For delicate herbs and some plants, you'll need shade, so now is the chance to build garden structures—like trellises and arbors—that offer some respite.

BY AMY NANCE ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEIA MADDEN

In Florida it is possible to grow both tropical and subtropical gardens, but nothing quite satisfies like a vegetable garden. Start with a plot of small proportions with good drainage, prepared soil (a good tilling a few weeks before you plant helps combine the compost) and a sense of what you're going to plant—make a garden map to go by. Try beans, cauliflower, radish, cherry tomato, carrots, celery, corn, collards and broccoli—all of which grow well in our South Florida climate.

And don't forget to protect your garden from wildlife with a fence, Litterer says. Another tip: Look at the backs of seed packets for spacing instructions, advises Porchey. Since there are so many seeds in any one packet, store the ones you don't use for another season. Plan to irrigate and fertilize every six weeks, and keep the first few inches of soil damp at all times (water twice a week). Most vegetables are annuals, so they appear, ripen and die off all in the same year. But if insects or disease become a problem, act fast. "Apply control products that are safe for edibles and allow you to continue harvesting," Litterer says. Or consider companion planting: Planting tomatoes near garlic wards off insects, for instance.

If you can't plant at home, because of space or other restrictions, consider participating in a community garden program. "For something like lettuce, you need half of your yard for the whole season and all you get is one head," laughs Sarah Crane of Geraldson Community Farm in Bradenton. "Community supported agriculture is great for people who don't want to grow their own food or who don't have the time for it."

CSAs such as Geraldson's work on a share system: You buy into the crop for that year and get to take some of the yield home each week—typically six to eight vegetables. Memberships go on sale in the summer and include 28 weeks of a variety of produce. To pick up your weekly bounty, the Bradenton-based farm offers a drop-off location in Sarasota, or you can go right to the farm itself. Everything is harvested that morning, and membership includes newsletters that offer recipes for the season's food.

Even Thoreau allowed that there is a kind of camaraderie to gardening, calling it "civil and social." If it is an atmosphere of civic-mindedness that you'd like—the sense that your efforts are replenishing far more than next summer's crop—join the folks at the new Orange Blossom Community Garden in Orange Avenue Park. "We help run the oldest and largest community garden in Sarasota," says Gail Harvey, master gardener with University of Florida's IFAS extension. "Coming in, we just looked at the neighborhood to see how we could assimilate. The best way to win over the already-welcoming neighbors? Pineapple. "We're famous for growing it," Harvey says.

At Orange Blossom, you can adopt an individual garden plot or work in the communal one, a great option for part-timers. "There's also an herb bed right up by the fence, so you can drive up and snip something fresh for dinner," Harvey says. In the future, Harvey envisions a pizza garden offering everything you need to make a healthy pizza—tomatoes, pepper, basil, eggplant, broccoli and zucchini, with recipe cards, invitations to a pizza party and a chef who will demonstrate.

Of course, there are as many ways to garden as there are types of gardens. To make Orange Blossom as accessible as possible to the residents of a nearby assisted living facility, volunteers plan to place bathtubs on platforms of varying height to

give the physically challenged the opportunity to garden as well. In an effort to be sustainable, Orange Blossom has secured all of the bathtubs coming out of the Hyatt Sarasota's remodel for use in the garden.

Platform or container gardening often implies a clever take on the down-in-the-dirt gardening model, and Ellenton's EarthBox Research Center offers a rare glimpse into this kind of innovation. The EarthBox was developed after a rough 1992 hurricane season by commercial tomato grower Blake Whisenant. "The fields were drowned. I was interested in working with boxes and in growing above ground," he says, explaining that the principle behind the box is the perfect diffusion of fertilizer. In the EarthBox, you can grow everything from cabbage to strawberries to flowers on even the smallest patch of condo concrete. Whisenant offers a 101 course on EarthBox growing, twice a week (the facility reopens in August), which he says is popular with grandparents and grandchildren. 🍅

Geraldson Community Farm, 941-723-3252; Sarasota Garden Club, 1131 Blvd. of the Arts, Sarasota, 941-955-0875; IFAS Sarasota Extension, 6700 Clark Rd., Twin Lakes Park, Sarasota, 941-861-5000; EarthBox Research Center, 1023 Ellenton Gillette Rd., Ellenton, 941-723-2911

