

HOME & GARDEN

Ways to grow a garden

Containers, beds, or shared parcels all offer ways to experience plant parenthood



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Rosemary Brady, 6, of Reading, selects seeds for her family's garden at Calareso's Farmstand and Garden Center.

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 27, 2014

A yard — or even a window box — is precious real estate for urban dwellers. But tight spaces are no obstacle to anyone who wants to start a garden.

“I get people with confined spaces all the time, whether it’s a postage stamp-sized plot of green, small fire escape, patio, or no outdoor space at all,” said Sara DiPalermo, a blogger and a merchandiser at Mahoney’s Garden Center in Brighton. “You can grow a single tomato plant in a 20-inch container and underplant it with herbs, like thyme, all around.”

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Jessie Banhazl would agree.

Once a non-gardener, she started Green City Growers in 2008, a Somerville-based company that converts unused space into gardens of fruits, vegetables, and flowers in 125 locations stretching from Beverly to Hingham and as far west as Framingham.

Gardens can pop up in unexpected places — like the grounds of Brockton High School, where students build raised garden beds and learn about composting and soil science.

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And in Brookline, there are community gardens such as the Minot Rose Garden, which has some 70 varieties and 300 bushes.

It doesn't take much space to start a garden. Window boxes, as well as container gardens on patios or front stoops, are two ways that novices can "really make a statement," said Michelle Dell Isola of Melrose, who started a landscape design business that focuses on these miniature gardens.

"Containers are so flexible and manageable," she said. "They're like an extended vase on your table, but last longer than flowers."



Succulents (members of the cactus family) are perfect for entry-level growers or those wanting a low-maintenance garden, since the plants require little water. Those with a bit more time can mix flowers with edibles, such as herbs and lettuce, in a container.

Most customers of Calareso's Farm Stand in Reading are not hard-core gardeners, said co-owner Joe Calareso. They buy potted plants at his stand, which receives weekly deliveries from as many as 15 greenhouses in New England.

The trend, he said, is for container vegetable gardens that require only daily watering and occasional fertilizing.

He suggests planting a flat of cherry tomatoes in a 10- to 12-inch pot, as well as three or four types of herbs in a container or window box.

"Gardening is much easier than people think," said Calareso.

Sometimes, aspiring gardeners doesn't need any land of their own. Yard-sharing, which helps people find gardening space, is spreading.

In 2009, Cathy Neal founded Bountiful Brookline, a volunteer initiative to promote locally grown food through education and coordination of yard sharing.

"Brookline's a very dense community, with 70 percent of residents living in multifamily homes, triple-deckers, apartments, and condos," she said. "But everyone seems to have a memory, from another country or of a grandfather's garden, and it

sparks them to try to grow something.”

Similarly, the website mycitygardens.com has been serving as a garden matchmaker since 2011, connecting Boston area residents who have space — mostly in Arlington, Somerville, and Cambridge — to those without it, said Lawrence Barriner II, who helps maintain the website.

Created by Jess Bryant of Cambridge and Howie Rosenblatt of Boston, the website has 200 active users, “even a couple of people in New York and Connecticut,” Barriner said.

“Someone might have a garden, but it’s too big and they want to share it with someone,” Barriner said. “Or someone has a yard, but doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

Community gardens, also known as victory gardens, are another option for people who don’t have their own land but want to get their hands dirty.

In Brookline, the popular 64-acre Larz Anderson Park’s community garden has 103 plots, at 15 feet by 15 feet each, as well as a long waiting list.

The Minot Rose Garden is a volunteer-driven enterprise located at the corner of St. Paul and Brown streets. “It’s a garden within a larger park of Winthrop Square,” said volunteer Linda Pehlke. A lot of volunteers, like Pehlke, “live in condos in Brookline, but love to garden.”

Another growing trend is weaving gardening into school curriculums.

At Brockton High, a gardening club and horticultural club were formed eight years ago to foster a connection between students and their food.

Two years ago, the school added a landscape design and development class, taught by biology teacher Ross Ferguson.

“Most kids have no concept of where their food is grown,” said Ferguson, who sees this lack of awareness contributing to such problems as obesity, childhood diabetes, and heart disease.

“Gardening seems to have skipped a generation,” he said.

But with every new crop of kids, Ferguson has witnessed a transition from aversion (“My \$300 sneakers are getting muddy”) to acceptance (“This is kind of cool”).

Surplus crops of kale, tomatoes, and peppers, grown from seeds in trays, are donated to Home at Heart, a homeless shelter.

In addition, fresh-picked produce is served in meals to teachers and staff, nurturing pride for the teen farmers, such as junior Timothy Lemack.

“It makes me feel good that we donate to a homeless shelter,” said Lemack, and help make healthier choices available in the culinary program.

No matter the type or location of a garden, it needs the same four ingredients: soil, plants, sunlight, and water, said Banhazl.

“Watering is the number one problem, because you either forget to water, or water too much,” said Banhazl, who, with Allison Houghton, wrote a self-published book, “The Urban Bounty: Growing Your Own Fresh Organic Produce, Anywhere.”

But sharing these four key ingredients doesn’t mean you should copy your neighbor.

“Every yard is a micro-climate,” she said.

At a duplex garden she worked on, one side had different soil and pest issues than the other, she said, “and they were only 100 feet from each other.”

Dell Isola counsels beginners to expect to make mistakes. But don’t let killing a plant deter you.

“Once you get into gardening, you don’t want to stop.”

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