

Home & Heart



Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

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It's springtime and I'm going into my gardening mode. Going through the seed catalogs, I find I want *everything*. My herb garden needs some more varieties. What about that new red sweet corn? If I plant some lavender plants now, I'll be able to harvest later this season.

Garden Prep

Since Bob-O and I have a dark brown adobe clay with a mixture of assorted sized rocks as our native growing medium, soil amendments are important. Sure, I compost. But it seems as though I never have all the compost I want or need. As soon as the ground thaws out, I will be tilling what compost I have into selected beds.

Two years ago, we made three raised beds out in the large fenced garden. It was amazing how big the cauliflowers were from one of those beds. I was sold on the whole concept of raised beds. I hope to add more this year.

It is easier to weed a raised bed. It is easier to amend the soil in a raised bed. I find the garden is not so overwhelming when I can say, "I will prep and plant one bed after work today." It's much easier to face than going to the garden gate and seeing *all* the weeds that need pulling throughout the *whole* garden.

Aged manure is my favorite and most common amendment. Since our neighbors the Fletts moved, we do not get the supply we used to. We do put some woodstove ashes into the soil, but you must be careful not to overdo it.

Garden Tips From Friends

My friend, Jaycin, taught me to always let one plant of every variety you grow go to seed. Of course with biennial plants like carrots, it will take two years for them to go to seed. I don't always catch all the mature seeds in the fall. Come spring, there are volunteer plants coming up all over. This is fine with me. When

the volunteer lettuces come up, I know it is time to plant my own seeds.

Another friend, BettyAnn, told me, "Once you have cosmos in your garden, you will always have cosmos in your garden." This is true. It also applies to cilantro, dill and nigella. I love annuals that freely reseed.

Donna taught me to plant tomatoes. First, dig a small trench about eight inches long. Pick off all the leaves of the tomato plant except for the top four or six. Lay the plant into the trench, bringing the topknot of leaves up out of the end. Fill in the trench. Roots will grow all along the stem that lies in the trench. This allows the tomato to get more water and nutrients. It also makes the plant sturdier to be anchored so well.

Sometimes you learn by observation rather than conversation. I had another friend who had a patch of comfrey and one of mint on the edge of her garden. Her husband tilled through the patches and pretty well distributed little bits of the plants throughout their growing area. Every tiny bit sprouted rootlets and grew. They had to abandon that garden and start a new one in a whole different area.

Gardens and Solar Cooking

Gardens and solar cooking are great partners. If you grow your herb garden by your solar cooking area, you can use the freshest herbs to flavor your food. Whole root vegetables and corn on the cob have that delicious homegrown flavor magnified by being cooked in a solar oven.

Anita, my friend and coworker, has plans to build a solar cooking area. It will incorporate an herb garden and a custom home-built barbecue. She wants to build the barbecue from native stones. No problem—there are certainly enough of them around. She will have a nice outdoor kitchen area to cook in. While the rice, or squash, or whatever cooks in the solar oven, she can add any barbecue food she desires to round out the meal, all seasoned with fresh herbs.

Organic and Open Pollinated

I advise you to get organic seed for your family's vegetable garden. Why? Because it just makes good sense. You don't want your family eating the chemicals some growers use to treat their seeds and seed stock.

If you buy open pollinated seed, you can save some from year to year. If you try to save seeds from a hybrid variety, the plant will revert to one of its ancestors the second year. One way to tell if a variety is open pollinated is if it is labeled "heirloom." People have saved and grown this kind of seed for a long time, mostly because the fruit or vegetable has exceptional taste or because it's a really dependable plant.

Most large growers now do what is called mono-cropping. They all grow acres of the same variety of hybrid, whatever it is. Most hybrid varieties for commercial growers are bred because the fruit or vegetable looks good, is all the same size and color, or ships well in packaging. Taste does not usually factor into it. Luckily there are a lot of seed companies selling non-hybrid open pollinated seeds. I find it exciting to add new varieties to the old favorites.

Make a Statement

Gardening is the most popular outdoor sport in America. There's a reason for that. It's good exercise. It relaxes you and lowers your blood pressure. The food you grow is the best you can eat. The two biggest political statements you can make in America today are to grow your own food and produce your own power.

Access

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Frost Dancing, Tips from a Northern Gardener

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