

garden



By Roger Myers

Roger Myers is the President and Founder of American Beauty Landscaping. Established in 1979, ABL is the Valley's industry leader with more than 100 national, state and local awards to its landscape design and build credit.

YO0608 Log # 513

Backyard Bounty

After a trip to the grocery store last week, I felt the need to resurrect my vegetable garden once again! A dollar for one cucumber, one green pepper or half a red pepper is just ridiculous. If you have just half a green thumb and especially if you have kids, say no to high prices and grow your own food. In a relatively small space you will get lots of good wholesome food, and provide a great learning experience for the little ones in your life as well. It's all about being green!

My dad involved me in gardening at the age of five, and I have been playing in the dirt ever since. He would die if he knew what became of our hobby – well actually he did, 12 years ago. He taught me a lot of things to help grow great vegetables, and faster than anyone, which led to my many 4-H honors in my youth.

Gardening is not always easy however, and you may get frustrated battling the birds and the bugs, the deer and the rabbits, the weather and the watering. If you are still interested then read on.

A small area, say 10' x 20', can produce more food than you can eat, with a little TLC and cost you less than \$100 for the season. The quality alone is worth the effort. If this is your first attempt then you may want to include a small "How-To" book, Gardening for Dummies etc., that is readily available where you purchase your plants.

I like to stick with the basics, which yield high returns with relatively little effort and take up minimal space. Tomatoes, both early and later, green peppers, yellow ones, squash and zucchini, beans and cucumbers, and possibly pumpkins – for the kids. (Pumpkins eat up lots of garden space, however, and growing the BIG ones has now become a science with its own "cult-clubs"). Corn takes up a lot of space too in the small garden, and can rob you of valuable sunlight due to long shadows.

I buy my plants from the local growers, as they tend to know more and their plants are generally healthier, in my opinion.

TOMATO TIPS:

When selecting tomato plants, bigger is not always better. Leggy plants with thin stalks seem to go into transplant shock more so than short ones with heavy stalks. Heavier stalks mean more tomatoes. Plant in fertile fresh-tilled soil in rows 3' apart and 3' between plants. Staking at this time is best, so you won't sever many roots later.

Here is an awesome tip: Bury all the stem in the soil up to the last two brackets of leaves. If your plant is 8" tall, then bury the bottom six inches. However, bury the stalk only 2" down and parallel with the surface – in other words – laying down. The plant will then produce a root system the entire length of the stalk! By planting horizontal instead of deep, your young plant enjoys the warm surface soil temperatures and grows faster than in the colder depth 4"-6" down. This may seem trivial but it can double your yield and ripen up to two weeks sooner. (My dad took great pride in being the first to harvest a tomato in the neighborhood!) By the way – six plants will feed a family of four, and the neighbors too!



Furthermore, really really serious gardeners will put an old tire around each plant in the early spring. The black rubber absorbs the early sun's rays and provides a mini-hot house effect for each plant. Try it on one or two plants, with your old snow tires! It works! This technique is most beneficial in April and May, so try it next year. Fertilize with a good balanced dry plant food when planting – then again just when blossoms are setting. Keep the weeds down; I recommend a fiber weed barrier covered with your lawn clippings. Again, this is a good heat source during the decomposition process. Be sure to till in your green manure in the fall, having removed your fabric.

The best way to increase soil fertility in the garden is to till in yard waste and/or kitchen waste. Practicing organics and re-cycling are good habits we all should practice in the garden of life.

Happy gardening...See you next month!