

Save on Food and Gasoline with a Vegetable Garden!

By Matt Cormons.

Well, it's happening! Food prices are on a sharp rise and with a little effort you can save a lot of money by growing your own. The purpose of this article is to give you a bit of encouragement to begin right now. You can do it even if you have a very small plot outside your house or trailer and are willing to give up some of your lawn and turn it toward a more useful purpose. The next important thing you will need is the commitment to water and weed.

Our family has been gardening for decades. Except for things we can't grow, like olives (for oil), bananas and oranges), we seldom buy food. We are lucky enough to have enough land to keep some livestock, including bees, chickens, ducks, geese, goats and cattle, including a milk cow, providing all the eggs, meat, milk, butter, yogurt and cheese we need. We also have berry bushes and fruit trees (rasp- and blackberries, kiwis, apples, pears, plums, peaches, quince, persimmons, figs). With the help of our freezers and food drier we have home-grown organic food all year round. We also harvest wild game from our woods and fields and fish from the bay, ocean and our farm pond, and enjoy various wild plants most consider useless weeds.

Some of what we grow each year includes a variety of peppers, tomatoes, white potatoes, squash, melons, okra, various herbs, strawberries, kiwis, beans, corn, broccoli, kale, cabbage, garlic, onions, lettuce, sweet potatoes, and more. This list may seem formidable, but it isn't if you build up to it over the years and stop at the point where it becomes too much work. Basically gardening is simple. You want to plant seeds or seedlings, keep them fed with manure or other fertilizers, keep the weeds out (the hardest part), give the climbers (pole beans) some kind of simple support, and keep them watered. Some things will grow better for you than others and a good book might tell you what your soil will need for them. Books are useful for information, but to the beginner they are a bit overwhelming, so start with one or a very few easy crops in a small plot as described below.

Tomatoes are a good choice for a new gardener - one of the easiest and most satisfying plants to grow. Now is the time to get them in (once the soil is warm enough to encourage rapid growth). I will discuss the method that has done very well for us for decades. Each spring we hoe out the many weeds that began to grow earlier in the season and dump them into a ring about 4-5 feet in diameter (or as big as you like) made from sturdy wire fencing. The weeds are full of good things tomatoes thrive on. We then plant the tomato seedlings (Dolly and George Faustino's greenhouse supplies us with a nice selection) on the perimeter of the ring, about 3-4 feet apart. We keep them well-watered until they look very happy and healthy, then water as needed. As they grow we tie the leaning stems and branches to the wire fencing with coarse cord like bailing twine, while adding weeds to the pile. The plants soon flower, start tiny green tomatoes that slowly enlarge and, if you're lucky, by the 4th of July you may be eating your first ripe, red, juicy, best-you-ever-ate tomato (or it may take a week or two longer). You might begin with a single tomato ring, while using the rest of your garden for another simple crop, like peppers (from seedlings). Bush beans, cucumbers, or summer squash are other easy crops. Just sow the seeds in weeded soil, keep the weeds down and watch as your plants eventually flower, then produce many pounds of wonderful fresh, tasty, healthy produce. Tomatoes have few garden pests to worry about (the huge tomato horn worm being our worse one, but easily

controlled by picking them off), beans are prone to Japanese beetles, and the rest we've been lucky with. Japanese beetles are controlled quite well with pheromone traps (see your garden supply store).

I hope you are now inspired to embark on a satisfying, money-saving hobby, that may soon become a necessity as food prices continue to rise. Good luck. If you have any questions get onto the Local Food Group web site and ask your question. I hope you had a chance to look at our site (www.eslocalfoodproject.org) where you can find and even sell local food. If you don't get a timely response, e-mail me at cormons@intercom.net, but please try the web site first.

By the way, summer squash is prolific. If you plant 5 seeds and only 2 survive you will still have more squash than you could eat. Don't say I didn't warn you!