

ORGANIC GARDENING

How To Start An Organic Vegetable Garden

Kym Pokorny



Photo by Faith Cathcart

Tom and Julie Johns bought Territorial Seed Co. a quarter century ago. Old-timers told them, "If you get really lucky, we'll have a depression."

The couple certainly didn't hope for it, but today's hair-raising economy is helping drive the increase in vegetable seed sales, which some companies say have spiked as much as 40 percent. Health issues, environmental concerns and taste also are helping feed a trend growing across the country.

"It's a perfect storm," says Bruce Butterfield, market research director for the National Gardening Association.

We have only to walk into a grocery store to see why growing our own produce makes sense: a small head of butter lettuce for \$3.99; \$2.49 for four tiny beets; \$1.99 for three medium oranges; and \$1 for two medium baking potatoes. To make it worse, nothing even tastes good.

Then there are the chemicals and bacteria we worry about eating along with our evening salad. Nutrition, too, is an issue. Most scary, though, is the possibility of losing our food supplies. It's no longer science fiction to think that it will become so expensive to ship food that it just won't get to us anymore. Some estimates put the number of miles our food travels from farm to table at 1,500. At the very least,

we can say a large portion comes from out of the area. Will we be able to afford sending fruits and vegetables several hundred miles?

"There's definitely a survival instinct working," says Territorial's Tom Johns. "People are asking, 'What do I have to do to be more self-sufficient?' Sit down at the table and it only takes 15 minutes to figure out you need to grow your own food."

For some people that thought is almost as scary as the alternative. As Sue Berge of New Dimension Seed says, "People say to go by instinct, but if you've never gardened, you don't have the instinct."

To encourage people to start an edible garden and assure people they can do it, Log House Plants, a wholesale nursery in Cottage Grove, has developed the "Grab and Grow" garden. Co-owner Alice Doyle describes it as a kit of nine tried-and-true plants that make a 72-square-foot garden. Each mixture has varieties chosen for the particular area where they're sold -- such as the Oregon coast.

W. Atlee Burpee & Co. has stepped up to the plate, too, introducing a six-pack of seeds that are easy to grow and, the company says, capable of producing as much as \$500 worth of groceries. Not bad for a \$10 investment.

No matter why you decide to grow your own, says Johns, "it's hard to find a downside."

SUE BERGE

The founder of New Dimension seed searches china for unusual vegetable varieties



Photo by Randy L. Rasmussen

Eight years ago, Sue Berge arrived at Portland Nursery with a collection of hand-packaged vegetable seed to sell. To her surprise, the manager said, "Yeah, go ahead and bring them in."

Pasted with rudimentary labels printed off her computer, the envelopes looked childish next to the professionally printed seed packets on the racks. But no matter. The Asian varieties nabbed a market that has increased right along with the sophistication of her seed packets.

Her childhood in Beijing, where cooking was a necessity as well as a preference, gave her the idea to include recipes along with her seeds, an addition that helps her company, New Dimension Seed, stand out.

The freshness of food in China was a contrast to the fast-food mentality she discovered when she arrived in Corvallis to get a master's degree in mechanical engineering from Oregon State University.

"I remembered as a kid drooling over a big, ripe tomato," Berge says a little wistfully.

She yearned for sweet Asian cucumbers, tender baby bok choy and crisp daikon radish. So she began to grow them and to experiment with the recipes of her youth, adapting some dishes for American tastebuds. Her family asked for more. When her teenage sons were young and brought friends home from school, she served cut-up cucumber. Once she brought out fresh peas.

"One of the kids said, 'I don't eat peas.' I told him to try it. He took a bite and said, 'These don't taste like peas.'"

The memory tickles Berge. It's so typical.

"You have to educate people about fresh vegetables," she says. "If they have the real thing, they can't give it up."

So, she gives talks and demonstrations and sells her vegetables at the Scappoose farmers market. Seed, as many as 50 varieties now, goes fast.

But it's not just her customers who continue to learn; Berge scours China for new varieties, brings them back and tests them in her quarter-acre garden. Both flavor and ease of cultivation in the Northwest go into her decision to put them on the market -- a sure recipe for success.

CHECK YOUR SAVINGS

Prove you save money -- or not -- with a calculator that estimates your food bill vs. the cost of raising your own vegetables. Just plug in the dollar amounts you spend and the calculator will do the rest. **Find it online:** oregonlive.com/hg
