



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

Out of the Yard and Onto the Fork

By Anne Raver, Quotes Roger Doiron and Rose Hayden-Smith

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MY peas are coming up — sugar snaps and snow peas — and the seeds I scattered out in my cold frame a month ago are now a blanket of baby greens. A few mornings ago, while weeding, I popped a tiny bok choy seedling into my mouth and let its peppery, sweet flavor explode on my tongue.

It's hard to describe the flavor of something so alive, hardly 10 seconds out of the earth. I want to say that it tastes green, but a grass blade does not taste like bok choy.

It's something you have to experience yourself, after doing something as simple as planting basil in a window box, or salad greens in one big pot and a no-fail cherry tomato plant in another.

Kitchen gardens are as old as the first hunter-gatherers who decided to settle down and watch the seeds grow. Walled medieval gardens protected carefully tended herbs, greens and fruit trees from marauders, both human and animal. The American colonists planted gardens as soon as they could, sowing seeds brought from Europe.

Call them survivor gardens.

Now, they are being discovered by a new generation of people who worry about just what is in that bag of spinach and how much fuel was consumed to grow it and to fly it a thousand miles.

Roger Doiron, a kitchen gardener in Scarborough, Me., produced so many vegetables last year that there are still a few rutabagas in his root cellar. "Our seed order was \$85, and we did not buy a single vegetable from June through January," he told me by phone earlier this month. He hadn't planted peas yet, he said, but the spinach he planted last fall was greening up.

Mr. Doiron, 41, spent 10 years in Belgium, running the Brussels headquarters of an international environmental group called Friends of the Earth, where he dealt with contaminated food production issues like [mad cow disease](#). He also met his wife, Jacqueline, there; she grew up in the Belgian countryside, and they often spent weekends there with her parents.

"I would trail after my mother-in-law, watching her harvest things I'd never seen growing before, like Brussels sprouts," Mr. Doiron said. "In Belgium, these people were eating out of the garden for three seasons, harvesting potatoes and salads nonstop."



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When he and his wife returned to Scarborough, his hometown, seven years ago, with three young sons, they bought a little Cape Cod house with a white picket fence. And they planted their yard, front and back, with vegetables and herbs, not just because they had grown used to the taste of fresh, organic food, but because Mr. Doiron wanted a flagship for the revolution.

Kitchen Gardeners International (www.kitchengardeners.org), a nonprofit organization Mr. Doiron founded in 2003, is a virtual community of 5,200 gardeners from 96 countries. On the Web site, where you can learn how to compost or grow garlic, a YouTube video shows the Doirons in their front yard. Swiss chard and cukes have replaced grass, and a sign poking out of the pumpkin patch reads “1,500 Miles/400 Gallons/Say What?” (The miles refer to the average distance food travels “from field to fork,” Mr. Doiron said; 400 gallons to the amount of oil used to make pesticides, fertilizer and animal feed, and to transport cattle and the like, to feed one person for one year.)

“We’re trying to reframe the backyard in terms of global sustainability, without losing any of the fun,” said Mr. Doiron, who manages to make a living from donations to his nonprofit and a fellowship from the [Thomas Jefferson](#) Agricultural Institute. He sees his audience as “people out there who are concerned about peak oil, or the gardening gastronomes who want the freshest food possible,” he said. “Or the people who joined a C.S.A.” — a community-supported agriculture project — “last year, and this year are thinking, you know what? I can do some of this myself.”

Mr. Doiron’s latest cause is challenging the presidential candidates to plant a garden on the White House lawn. He has posted his proposal, “Eat the View,” on www.ondayone.org, a Web site where people record their visions for the next president.

“This would not be a quaint little garden for the White House chef,” he said. “I have something fairly ambitious in mind, that would make a powerful political statement — a garden large enough to cover most of what the White House needs, with an overflow to a local food pantry.”

Mr. Doiron is actually suggesting a return to a tradition as old as the founding fathers. [John Adams](#) planted a vegetable garden at the White House to feed his family, “because back then, presidents had to fund their own household,” said Rose Hayden-Smith, a historian and garden educator based at the University of California in Davis.

During World War I, to save fuel and labor, [President Woodrow Wilson](#) had sheep grazing on the White House lawn. His wife, Edith, planted vegetables to inspire the Liberty Garden campaign, in which thousands of students, called “Soldiers of the Soil,” grew their own food in their schools and communities, she said. As the Allied powers began to win, the name Liberty Garden was changed to Victory Garden.

Just after Pearl Harbor, Ms. Hayden-Smith said, another Victory Garden campaign was started. [Eleanor](#)



[Roosevelt](#) grew peas and carrots on the White House lawn, and by the end of the war, Ms. Hayden-Smith said, “Americans were producing 40 percent of the country’s produce” in their gardens.

So here we are, at war again, with gasoline over \$3 a gallon and a bag of possibly polluted spinach about the same price. Though overall garden sales are slightly down, according to the latest National Gardening Association survey, from 2007, vegetable gardening sales are up by 22 percent and herb gardening sales are up by 52 percent.

I’ve been growing vegetables since I was a child. I don’t remember anyone ever saying, could you run out and grab some Merveille des Quatre Saisons from the kitchen garden? We just grew lettuce in the vegetable garden.

But my gurus took me far beyond the chemical fertilizers and pesticides of my father’s garden: J. L. Rodale, who preached the religion of compost; Shepherd and Ellen Ogden, who started the Cook’s Garden, a mail-order seed company in Vermont that carried French heirlooms; Barbara Damrosch, whose “Garden Primer” was my mud-stained bible; and Rosalind Creasy, who shook up her neighbors in Los Altos, Calif., in 1984, when she dug up her front lawn to plant edibles.

Ms. Creasy’s book, “The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping” ([Sierra Club Books](#), 1982), started a little revolution of its own. Now she is working on a revision, scheduled to be out in 2010.

Interestingly, in March, Ms. Damrosch put out a revised edition of “The Garden Primer” that reflected a greater understanding of the environment, from invasive species to the science of soil.

“I’m a recovered double-digger,” she said, referring to the English tradition of digging deep into the soil and reversing its layers. Doing so destroys the soil’s structure and the complex civilization underground; there’s no double-digging in the new edition.

Chemical fertilizers and pesticides are not discussed either.

“I used to say, ‘I prefer to use compost and add organic matter, but if you use chemical fertilizer, you could do this,’” Ms. Damrosch said. Now “there’s none of the if-you-dos. Nobody is coming to me and saying, I want to garden with chemicals.”

These new gardeners are not necessarily back-to-the-land types.

“I think a lot of the young ones are in search of authenticity,” Ms. Damrosch said. “They still have their iPods and their BlackBerrys, but they’re interested in crafts and knitting and acoustic music. They don’t like the fake. They can see through stuff.”



Also, many of them grew up with environmentalism.

Ms. Creasy said: “They have been trained in schools to look at the consequences of what we’re doing. My kids dissected a lung from a smoker in the sixth grade. They study frogs that have been put in ponds with too many pesticides.”

What’s the same for everyone is the joy of tasting that first, just-dug-up potato.

“It seems like a miracle,” Ms. Damrosch said. “Like buried gold. And the flavor is incredible.”

That connection to the earth has never changed.

Meet the Endive Before Eating It

IF I had only a few pots on a terrace, or a tiny outdoor plot, I would grow one big pot or a square foot of mesclun, a mix of salad greens that includes arugula, Japanese mustard, endive, and red and green lettuces. Simply fill a pot with a mix of potting soil and organic compost, and moisten well. Sprinkle the seeds over the surface, cover with a quarter inch of compost and water lightly to moisten the seeds. As the first baby greens grow, pull out any weeds and thin out the mesclun, eating the leaves you pull. Start more greens every couple of weeks, and move the pots into semi-shade when hot weather arrives. Or switch to heat-tolerant lettuces, like oak leaf and buttercrunch.

Fill a few smaller pots with herbs: Italian parsley, Genovese basil, dill, oregano, bay and rosemary. Plant one or two no-fail tomatoes, one each to a large pot, or one to a two-square-foot plot: one cherry type, like Mexico Midget, Jaune Flammé or Sungold, and a big juicy producer like Big Beef, Better Boy or Rutgers. (Plants are readily available at farmers’ markets and plant sales or by mail order, from www.burpee.com, www.seedsavers.org, www.whiteflowerfarm.com and others.)

Add a Meyer lemon in a big pot, if you have a sunny spot where it can winter indoors, and you can enjoy organic lemons all year. Edible flowers, like my favorite, Empress of India nasturtiums, can be tucked into pots or garden beds, and plucked as a spicy garnish for salads.