

Urban farming

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Food from the garden

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Urban gardeners will be inspired by the example of Forrest F., who maintains one of the largest gardens in Bloomington. A vegetarian, he grows about fifty percent of his food each year in his own back yard. Located near Bryan Park on a double lot, his garden has several times more square feet than his house does.

“My parents and I bought this place when I came here for graduate school in 2007,” Forrest explained. “The garden was in sorry shape because 2007 was very dry. To me, the upper yard looked as though it had been a garden, had gone to weeds and had been mowed down. That fall, in the middle, the weedy stuff was greener than anywhere else in the yard, which told me that the soil was better there. I thought that was great! I rented a Rototiller and tilled everything up.”



Forrest examines a bed recently sown for cold-season harvesting

To recondition the soil, Forrest sheet-mulched half the garden that first autumn, spreading layers of newspaper covered with composted manure. “It’s very effective at knocking back weeds,” Forrest commented. “The soil here in Bloomington is very clayey, so manure helps the texture.”

The other half of the garden he planted with a cover crop of oats. Cover crops prevent nutrients from washing out of bare soil over the winter.

The following year Forrest repeated the process, swapping sides. After that, the entire garden was up and running.

A passerby who sees the size of the garden might assume that Forrest has a lot of extra produce to get rid of.

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“I try to scale the garden to what I can eat,” he noted. “I’ve gotten pretty good at that. I strive to be a year-round gardener. If I had this much space and planted only for the summer with tomatoes, squash and peppers, then it’d be way too much.”

For most of each year, Forrest has something growing in his garden. “You get a lot more food out of your garden if you think beyond summer,” he noted. “Ask yourself ‘How can I have food April through December’ instead of ‘July through September.’”



A view of the shed across the large garden.

Row covers provide winter shelter for cold-hardy greens like kale. His garden abounds with overwintered greens each spring: kale, mache, spinach, lettuce. He grows the usual summer vegetables interplanted with flowers, and in the fall does a second planting of cool-weather greens whose growing season will extend deep into the winter.

His yard has peach and apple trees, raspberry canes, grape vines covering an arbor, cultivated native persimmons, pawpaw trees and a young pecan tree. Around the perimeter wildflowers were planted, along with sunflowers and red broom corn, an ornamental.

“This is a form of sorghum, actually,” he said, popping the red seeds off the end of their stems. “They grind this in India and cook with it. I’d like to try to do that myself.” He is also drying out the heads of his towering amaranth flowers in order to harvest the edible seeds.

As a boy growing up in western Massachusetts, Forrest’s family lived in the country on land that had an old apple orchard on it, and his mother is an avid gardener. After he graduated from college he apprenticed on a farm in Maine for several years. He spent several years in India doing research and incidentally learned about the food traditions of that country.

He stores much of the food he raises.

“I was freezing three or four gallons a week of green beans this summer,” he recalled. “I do a lot of in-garden storage with root crops. I just mulch well with straw and leave the parsnips and carrots in the ground until I need them.”

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He advises would-be gardeners to be willing to experiment. “The way you develop expertise is by making experiments,” he pointed out. “I had a huge jump on things by working on a farm.” He plants using seed from Fedco in Maine, which specializes in non-genetically-modified varieties that can withstand extremely low temperatures. “If they will grow in Maine, they’ll grow here,” he said.

The nodding head of a wildflower bends horizontally beneath its own weight.



Forrest emphasized that money can’t buy the quality and taste of vegetables fresh from his garden.

“I have a reputation at SPEA for my amazing salads,” he said proudly. “You can pay money at the Farmers’ Market for good vegetables, but mine are better. And mine are cheaper!”

Many people think that a garden this big must require a lot of maintenance.

“It really doesn’t take that much time; but it DOES take regular time every week or so, especially in the spring,” he said. “If I count my garden hours as exercise, I don’t spend any more time gardening than other people spend jogging. I like doing the work, that’s a big part; I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t enjoy it. I’m an academic but I like to work with my hands. I feel connected with things, and it gives me a reason to be outside.”

He summed up, “People should know that they can grow most of their own food in a suburban yard.”



Bright sunflowers bloom along the fence



An excellent haul of butternut squash from Forrest’s garden.

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The garden fills much of the oversized lot.



Amaranth in full autumn color.