

Posted on Fri, Apr. 24, 2009

## Veggies, and interest, growing

**More gardeners want to plant their own food. It's a lot of fun, but weather and work must be respected.**



By Ginny Smith

One of the first, and most humbling, lessons of the garden is weather. You can't control it.

That reality arrived with a splash last week at the Camden Children's Garden, where about 35 adults and kids gathered on a rainy, raw day to learn the basics of growing vegetables.

Pretty good crowd for a miserable day, especially midweek, but this is the story of 2009, the Year of the Vegetable Garden.

"Interest in vegetable gardening is way, way up," says Mike Devlin, the Camden garden's executive director.

The National Gardening Association estimates that seven million more American households will plant vegetables, fruit, or herbs this year for a total of 43 million, up 19 percent from 2008.

These folks want fresh, local, safe food. They're daunted by high food prices. Perhaps they're even inspired by the new organic garden on the White House lawn.

But how many suffer from too-great expectations? How many are seduced by this tempting notion: Just a few seeds or plants in the ground could translate into hundreds of dollars worth of fresh food.

Despite the hype, gardening is a lot of work. And unless you live in a laboratory with perpetually perfect weather and no critters or drought, diseases or pests, honest gardeners will tell you: The results are far from guaranteed.

"People tell me they have a black thumb. Well, I have a green thumb, but I wasn't born with it," says Jeff Clarke, supervisor at the Camden Children's Garden, who taught the workshop.

Clarke grew up on 10 acres in Villanova with eight siblings in a gardening family. After 20 years at a meatpacking plant, he landed at the Children's Garden, where he's been happily working and teaching for the last 10 years.

And Clarke, like every other pro out there, takes nothing for granted in his garden. He is the constant student. Clarke reads about gardening, compares notes with other gardeners, Googles exhaustively, experiments in his South Jersey garden, and, yes, makes mistakes and fails utterly.

"I can't grow cucumbers to save my life. I've tried everything," he says. "I've given up."

Successful gardening is "a bit of an art and a bit of a science, which frustrates people because they want a magic answer," says Meredith Melendez, master gardener coordinator for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension in Burlington County.

While they're trying to puzzle it all out, Melendez says, many gardeners, not just beginners, forget two basic things.

A big one is this: They don't wait for the region's last-frost date to plant their tomatoes and annual flowers. And no wonder. Garden centers and chains just as eagerly jump the gun and sell stuff early.

Mother's Day, this year May 10, has long been considered the last-frost day in the Philadelphia region, but local gardeners have been successfully pushing it in recent years. "We consider early May OK," Melendez says, "but to be extra safe, wait till Mother's Day."

People also forget that critters find their garden as irresistible as they do. "Moles, voles, and deer are the number-one group of animals we hear about here," Melendez says. Rabbits, too.

Raised beds will solve some problems. Otherwise, try fencing - 10 feet high for deer, several feet down for moles. "Voles are tough," Melendez concedes.

Bill Alexander has battled them all, plus an Iron Man-groundhog named Superchuck. He's the author of *The \$64 Tomato: How One Man Nearly Lost His Sanity, Spent a Fortune, and Endured an Existential Crisis in the Quest for the Perfect Garden* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006).

Alexander and his wife began their gardening adventure on three acres in Cornwall, N.Y., on the banks of the Hudson River, with the greatest of expectations. Ah, life as a gentleman farmer, wearing suspenders, living off the land, saving money . . .

There were just a few bumps on the road to nirvana. On a crazy whim, Alexander did a cost analysis of his first harvest and discovered that his 19 hard-won Brandywine heirloom tomatoes had cost him \$64 apiece.

Yikes!

"First of all, I'm in favor of people starting home gardens again. I'm a real cheerleader," Alexander says in an interview, "but one of the things people are going to face when they grow their own is . . . I think they're going to have a new appreciation for how cheap food is in the

store. It may be cheaper to grow your own, but not always."

Gardeners sometimes forget to factor in the cost of their own time and labor, which Alexander thinks may be a good thing. "You'll find you might have been better off taking a greeter job at Walmart for six hours a week, if there are any left," he says. "Oh, wait. I think former Wall Street executives have taken all of those."

Whatever else you expect from it, gardening should be more fun than work. In his fun column, Alexander says he's actually taking a little breather and cutting back this year. In the work column, now that he's whopped the wild things that mauled his crops, he's got neighborhood cats to deal with.

"They like to pee in my organic lettuce and dig up my blueberry bushes," he says with a sigh.

Whatever. Be patient. And keep telling yourself this is fun - because some day it absolutely will be.

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RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Jeff Clarke of Camden Children's Garden leads a workshop on planting vegetables, demonstrating how to plant a tomato.

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RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Jeff Clarke, leader of the Camden Children's Garden workshop, offers Niesha Rey a whiff of a pansy, given to participants. Seven million more households will be planting vegetable gardens this year, the National Gardening Association says. Many gardeners, not just beginners, forget two things: Frost date and critters.

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Ready to plant: Ryan Milamptey, 5, left with a pansy after attending the Children's Garden workshop with his family.