

SOLUTIONS



Left: This Wheaton garden, designed by Backyard Bounty, boasts features such as raised beds, climbing trellises, a fence surround and (in foreground) cold frames, which fit on top of beds to protect late fall and early spring crops.

I checked out her website, I saw a variety of standard kitchen garden plans on offer. “South of France Pottager” provides vegetables and herbs for provincial cooking. The “Pizza Garden” includes tomatoes, basil and oregano for sauces and summer squash, peppers and eggplants for toppings. “Eat Your Greens” garden features organic mesclun, chard, arugula, kale, spinach and bok choy. I also liked the “Herbal Remedies Garden,” filled with culinary and healing herbs for teas and soups.

Mattei met me in my backyard one June afternoon, toolbox in hand for an in-home consultation. She began by confirming that

our yard gets full sun until about 3 p.m. (six to eight hours of sun is critical for vegetables). Then she asked, “So, what do you like to cook?” I told her I favor cuisines that invite creative modifications and experimentation like New American, Mediterranean and Californian. In the winter, I make a lot of soups whose recipes call

for cold season vegetables like carrots, snow peas, spinach, leeks and potatoes.

She wrote all that down then asked, “How much time do you want to spend in the garden? We want to plan something that you will be able to manage and maintain.”

As a freelance writer who works from a home office, I have flexibility in my day. I envisioned myself walking away from my computer to water my tomatoes and pinch the basil, clearly a much healthier diversion for me than my usual trip to the pantry. Still, I knew I did not want to spend the bulk of my evenings and weekends weeding and watering.

Small wonder

It doesn't take much space to create a kitchen garden that produces a bounty of crops for cooking. But you do need a plan (and some elbow grease). *By Stephanie Citron*

I confess: I am fanatical about fresh food. I have often fantasized about growing my own vegetables and creating meals centered on whatever is ripe on a given day. I yearn to control the soil my food is grown in, ensuring pesticides don't endanger the nutrients or my family. A self-proclaimed germaphobe, I prefer knowing whose hands have touched my food. The best way to do all these things, I recently decided, was to grow my own.

My family has lived in our Ruxton house for three years, and our previous house for 15. So, why did it take me so long to have the idea to grow food in our backyard? Sim-

ple. Like many folks, I didn't think it was possible. I didn't think I had the acreage or the ability. I knew, too, that growing my own food would be more involved than just planting a packet of seeds. Any successful garden requires a plan—and a food garden, even more so.

That's where Edamarie Mattei, founder of Backyard Bounty, a Bethesda-based firm that specializes in creating organic kitchen gardens, came in. Mattei is a master gardener with a master's degree in landscape design who has made it her business to help folks like me reap bounty from their suburban—or urban—backyards. When

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I deduced that I could comfortably devote 20 to 30 minutes to gardening nearly every day. Mattei assured me that in that time, I could surely maintain a three-bed garden, as long as it was well-designed and had borders. Backyard Bounty's basic package features a single 8-by-3-by-11-foot bed with organic soil, plants, soaker hose, raised cedar bed with cedar lattice trellis and a few other essentials for \$1,250. Beyond installation, each package includes a growing guide detailing fertilizing and integrated pest management strategies, a crop rotation map and a profile of each vegetable and its guidelines for planting, maintaining, harvesting and cooking.

Because I had more time and wanted more variety and yield—I like to freeze vegetables, as well as cook large amounts of dishes and freeze them—I opted for a custom plan that would involve three beds and a variety of extras for about \$3,700. These three beds wouldn't require much room—they would be nestled into our yard, between our pool and our privacy fence—but since they would be well-planned, they would yield quite a bounty.

KNOWING THAT I WANTED TO GROW VEGETABLES all year-round, Mattei created a three-season rotation garden plan. For autumn, we would plant romaine and mesclun lettuces, green beans, broccoli, carrots and lima beans. Though it added to the cost, we agreed upon cold frames—a mini-greenhouse structure that fits on top of a garden bed—to protect the late fall and early spring crops like peas and fava beans. Lettuce can grow in a cold frame up to Thanksgiving and carrots can be pulled from the ground as long as it isn't frozen.

Following the autumn harvest in mid-to-late November, I'll need to plant my spring garden, which will feature tomato, basil, spring squash and green bean beds that could be harvested starting in May. For summer, I'll plant heirloom and cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, garlic, onions, garlic, peas, sugar snap peas, potatoes and zucchini.

This technique, called succession planting, ensures that there is never an unplanted area in the garden. Another type of succession planting involves staggering planting times of the same vegetable by re-seeding the crop every two to three weeks, so they sprout throughout the sea-

son. Thanks to the crop rotation map, I'll know how to do that.

I was intrigued to see that Mattei's plan for my garden involved planting vegetables near their "companions." Who knew that all vegetable plants have natural companions that supply essential nutrients for others, such as carrots together with lettuce and beans? Companions planted together are more vigorous, with increased crop yield and they naturally deflect invasive insects. Conversely, some vegetables inhibit the growth of others, such as broccoli with tomatoes.

Before the plan was finalized, I expressed concern about the fragrance of the autumn herbs—oregano, chives, rosemary, savory, tarragon and Italian parsley—attracting deer and other wild animals, but Mattei assured me that deer don't eat herbs because the scent is too powerful. Then I told her I worried about bees near the pool in the summer, especially since my husband is allergic to them. Mattei was adamant that bees are essential to vegetable gardens for pollination and suggested we plant flowers toward the back of the garden. "As long as bees are occupied with flowers," she says, "they will ignore humans."

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO CREATE A SETTING where you enjoy spending time," Mattei told me, stressing that the aesthetic appearance of the garden was as important as its produce. She proposed that the three bed structures feature Mediterranean design elements such as terra cotta tiles in colors that coordinate with my house. Around the beds will be 'Sky Pencil' Japanese Holly, a hardier version of Italian Cypress, and black-eyed Susans, cone flowers and coreopsis that will evoke a wildflower effect and attract pollinators but require little maintenance. Chicken wire will be installed around the bottom of the existing fence to prevent animals from burrowing underneath. Path gravel will be laid between the beds to assist with drainage, and help it from growing out of control.

With my plan in hand, I can hardly wait for the day I transport a basket of freshly picked organic vegetables and herbs the few steps from my backyard to my kitchen and create a beautiful meal. □

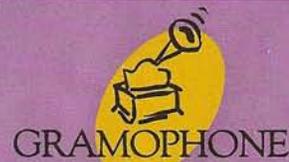
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