

April 2011

# Spring Tonic

*Celebrating Gardening*



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## Raising Berries, Greens, Even Chickens . . .

### Two pear trees, two apple

trees, two plums, a nectarine, a peach and a sour cherry; raspberries (early and late varieties to have a constant supply); garlic, asparagus, sweet potatoes, onions, snap peas, spinach, beets, kale, lettuce, arugula, a ton of tomatoes, cukes. And include sage, thyme, oregano, sorrel, chives, parsley and rosemary.

All on less than an acre.

In town.

The lawn in front of Peggy O'Brien's house has been transformed from a plain green swath to a verdant, productive vegetable garden.

O'Brien is one of my favorite people to talk to about gardens (see Spring Tonic 2009). As a gardener she is always growing; seeding her life with new possibilities. Two years ago she was instrumental in establishing the garden for the farm-to-table produce the Boks had wanted for their restaurant at The White Hart.

These days her newly formed company, Edible Views, is focused on helping like-minded people establish kitchen gardens, converting their land into a highly productive food resource.

"People don't traditionally think of vegetables as something beautiful to look at," O'Brien told me. "But I think manicured rows of edible greens and trellised tomatoes are gorgeous."

## On an Acre In Town



Marsden Epworth

*Peggy O'Brien on her lawn-cum-farm in Salisbury*

Her enthusiasm for gardening is rooted in an interest in whole health.

"I'm focused on growing safe food, because you know its source and you control how it's tended, and it's as close to your table as your backyard." Everything O'Brien uses is organic, maybe not government certified (since that involves so much red tape) but rather in keeping with the "the farmers pledge."

"Knowing your farmer is the best assurance that the

food you buy is responsibly grown and hasn't been exposed to the wide variety of toxins out there," O'Brien said. "I wouldn't use manure from non-organic cows. I had a conversation with a biodynamic gardener and he asked, 'How do you feel about manure?' And I said, 'It's great, but I don't want to use the poop of cows that are fed genetically engineered corn or alfalfa.'"

The process of turning lawn into a garden can be labor-intensive at first. "I was amazed

by the items I dug up: clamshells, saw blades, a gun with the chamber missing, cinder blocks. It was basically landfill. So the earth had to be replenished with leaf mulch, wood ash, chicken droppings..." Not all dirt is good soil.

"We have a bumper sticker on our wheelbarrow that says, don't treat your soil like dirt."

O'Brien recommends soil testing. The Cornell Extensions in New York state (there is one in Millbrook) and the University of Connecticut both sell

soil-testing kits online. "They'll give you a breakout of all the major and micro nutrients that are in the soil, the soil pH, which will give you a good gauge of what you have and what would best be planted where," O'Brien said.

Gardening is a science, and talking to O'Brien it seems she must have gotten straight As in biology.

After the soil is tested, enriched and ready for planting

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what goes in the ground is equally important. O'Brien uses organic seeds or starts. She gets her seeds from Fedco Seeds, Johnny's Selected Seeds, Seed Savers Exchange and Turtle Tree Seed.

It's not uncommon for people to get frightened off by the hugeness of the undertaking but O'Brien points out it can be done in stages over the years. She planted her orchard three years ago, the berry patch came a year or two later. Every year a bit more of her property is given over to a new vegetable bed.

That strip along the fence line? Perfect for a potato patch.

This year.

In deciding what to plant, O'Brien said there are many considerations.

"Stuff that doesn't take too much room; so, no melons, or squash." The berries were planted in an area of lawn



Margaret Epworth

## ... Growing Plenty for All

that is easily accessible, so that "The children in the neighborhood are welcome to go and pick them. There are plenty for all." Some vegetables can be planted in the fall or even summer for a harvest the following spring: spinach, carrots, parsnips and garlic. (Cover the area where these are planted with a layer of straw for protection.)

"A few days ago, we pulled a couple of carrots that overwintered and they were good, still sweet."

Gardening is a mating game. Fruit-bearing bushes and trees

must be planted in twos so they can cross-pollinate. And some plants are highly synergistic such as tomatoes and carrots, beets and onions, green beans and eggplants.

Right outside her back door, O'Brien planted snap peas last year. Wonderful to eat and as a by-product, they leave nitrogen in the soil. Perfect now for a heavy-feeder (a plant that takes a lot of energy from the soil) such as kale, broccoli, chard or collards. It's called companion planting.

There is so much that goes

into planning, creating and tending a garden. Is it worth it? Consider this.

It's early April and in the garden in front of O'Brien's house the garlic is already nudging its way out of the earth and a number of hardy greens that overwintered in the cold frame: spinach, rash, rouge d'hiver (a baby red lettuce), tatsoi (a buttery, Asian green, that is good raw or stir-fried) look like they'll be ready for salad in a few weeks.

Resources O'Brien recommends include the books "Car-

rots Love Tomatoes" by Louise Riotte, "The Woodchuck's Guide to Gardening" by Ron Krupp and anything by Eliot Coleman including "Extending The Harvest" which has a lot about cold frames.

For a local organic resource, she is a big fan of The Phantom Gardener in Rhinebeck, NY.

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