

Feeding Ourselves

My family enjoys the privilege of growing food for our neighbors. Every week for the past eleven months (every other week during December – March), twenty-two families have come to our garden to pick up what is ready for harvest at that moment. The list of food distributed during just the Winter months is startling:

75 Peppers	75 bunches of	500 dozen Eggs
62 pounds of Chinese Cabbage	Rutabaga	200 bunches of Carrots
125 pints of Frozen Berries	50 pints of Dried Asian Pears	103 bunches of Beets
50 pounds of Rhubarb	562 pounds of	75 bunches of Leeks
39 pounds of Spinach	Potatoes	125 pounds of Baby Gourmet Salad
12 bunches of Radishes	75 shares of Garlic	87 pounds of Baby Mustard Greens
37 pounds of Nettle	25 dozen Kiwi	200 bunches of Kale
12 pounds of	25 Lemons	62 bunches of Green Onions
Watercress	25 Red Cabbages	
	50 pounds of Chard	
	75 jars of Jam	150 Winter Squash

For the wildly abundant Summer growing season, we added six more families and have been preserving food like crazy to supplement the slow growing season. All this from a ½ acre organic method garden, two adults, and two ‘tween farm stewards.

The point is simple: we can to a great extent feed ourselves here on Vashon Island. While our entire family has chosen farming as a lifestyle and a business, growing food certainly does not have to be done on such an intensive scale. Every yard is perfect for providing nutrition, flavor, enhanced health, and mealtime celebrations.

How to get started

My first suggestion is to visit the Farmers Market. What are commercial farmers and backyard gardeners growing on the Island right now? What seems the most common, the most vibrant, the most used in your own cooking? What calls to you the most? Please do not plan a garden full of “what you should be eating” unless you really do love that food. Such a project often ends up like other to-do lists of good intentions and will only foster procrastination, guilt, and weeds.

The growers of Vashon Island Growers Association truly love to bring you the best of their efforts from the first weekend in April to mid-October. Rather than trying to grow everything all at once, shop the Market for what these farmers do best and use your yard space for what you love most. Then, choose a theme: if you are already a fan of the Farmers Market and find yourself missing the fresh produce November through March, plan to grow a winter greens

garden. Even during the crazy ice and snow last year, our baby mustards, hearty kales, and crisp Chinese cabbages remained full of life and flavor.

If you honestly know that you have good intentions to start your garden but will lose motivation after a few weeks, grow long-maturing plants like potatoes, garlic, onions, and winter squashes. These plants, if defended from weeds as young starts, will quickly grow densely enough to protect themselves. They are also excellent keepers, making even sporadic gardening efforts pay off in months of tasty meals. Perennials are another excellent choice for folks with more desire than time. Rhubarb, asparagus, blueberries, strawberries, horseradish, even watercress and nettle will reward you for years to come.

Speaking of strawberries, a worthy theme might be to grow the items the FDA has identified as most likely to be contaminated with pesticides. The Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce ranks pesticide contamination for 44 popular fruits and vegetables based on an analysis of nearly 51,000 tests for pesticides on these foods, conducted from 2000 and 2005 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration. Sweet bell peppers, celery, lettuce, spinach, and potatoes are the vegetables most likely to expose consumers to pesticides. Fortunately for us, these thrive in our maritime climate. If you would like to focus on perennial plantings, you'll be doing your body a great favor as seven of the top ten contaminated foods are fruits: peaches, apples, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, grapes, and pears. Again, Vashon and Maury Island offers an excellent climate for home orchards of these varieties. The Vashon Island Fruit Club is a fabulous organization for learning every aspect of growing your own fruit. Check out www.vashonfruitclub.org for more information.