

Reap abundant know-how at the farmers market

By MARTY ROSS, Special to The Star



Photo by The Star's TAMMY LJUNGBLAD; seed packets from Family Tree Nursery in Overland Park and antique tin from Marti J. Huff of Mission Road Antique Mall.

Market gardeners are specialists, but they always seem to remember their roots.

Gardening experience can't be bought, but you can get it for free at farmers markets.

Market gardeners are among the most successful gardeners in Kansas City. They are in the business of bringing fresh tomatoes, peas, potatoes, herbs, flowers and fruit to seasonal markets that are just getting started all over town — but they also give away bushels of enthusiasm and expertise.

“It’s our social time,” says Fred Messner, who sells plants and produce at Kansas City’s City Market on Saturdays. Messner and his wife, Helen, own Nature’s Choice Biodynamic Farm in St. Joseph. They grow and sell 70 different crops, but Messner encourages his customers to grow their own, too. “I’ve taken on a mission to educate and help people,” he says.

Market gardeners are specialists, but they always seem to remember their roots. They still get a thrill from growing radishes from seed and haven’t lost the pleasure of picking sun-warmed beans. The ripe tomatoes, crisp cucumbers, fragrant herbs and colorful bouquets of fresh flowers they sell aren’t just products. They represent fulfilling connections to nature and the seasons. Market gardeners are eager to share this experience.

Growing your own food is satisfying even on a small scale, says Julie Coon, who, with Natasha Karsk, owns Peas on Earth Urban Farm. The new farm, on three city lots in Kansas City’s West Side, sold fresh produce to restaurants last year and plans an on-site market this year.

“Every year I try to grow something new,” Coon says. She discovered kohlrabi when another farmer shared seedling plants, and now it is one of her favorite crops. Plant kohlrabi seeds in the ground this month, she advises, for a harvest in about seven weeks.

“When you have a crop you grew yourself, you take such pride in it, and you learn how to cook with it,” she says.

Early spring is a great time to plant radishes and greens of all kinds and to prepare the garden for seedling transplants that can be set out next month, when the weather warms up.

Diane Hershberger and her husband, Roger Kube, own Stony Crest Urban Farm in south Kansas City, where they are raising lettuce, beets and carrots and growing tomato, pepper and herb plants for sale at the farmers market in Waldo. Hershberger tries to surprise farmers market customers with unexpected crops. Last year, she grew bright red okra.

Home gardeners sometimes get discouraged by bugs and blights, but succession planting — which means sowing seeds or setting out transplants of the same crop every few weeks to ensure or extend the harvest — sometimes solves these problems, Hershberger says. Cucumber vines are susceptible to downy mildew, but succession planting will help avoid a total crop failure and “you’ll be able to keep yourself in cucumbers,” she says.

Alicia Ellingsworth, farm manager for the Kansas City Center for Urban Agriculture, encourages gardeners to grow crops from seed and to save the seeds of crops they love to plant for next year. Last August, she planted French filet bean seeds at the center’s Gibbs Road Community Farm in Kansas City, Kan., and in October she was at the Farmers Community Market in Brookside doing a brisk trade in beans at \$6 a pound.

“It’s never too late to plant a seed,” she says. “What do you really have to lose?” The long dry season last summer was hard on the bean crop, she says, so this year she plans to grow pole beans, which are more heat-tolerant, and hopes to have beans by midsummer.

To get the season off to a satisfying start, Ellingsworth recommends planting a quick radish crop. Check the “days to harvest” information on seed packets, and look for a radish that matures in about 25 days. Now is a great time to plant them, she says.

Tim and Catherine Sullivan, owners of Sullivan’s Greenhouse in Cleveland, Mo., raise thousands of herb plants they sell at local garden shops and at the Overland Park Farmers Market. Plain sweet basil is the most popular of the 25 kinds of basil they grow, but a variety called Mini Purple is Tim Sullivan’s favorite. It thrives in hot weather, never develops a sharp taste and looks pretty in the garden, he says.

Customers at farmers markets also love to share their experiences and swap tips about growing and using herbs, Sullivan says. “They tell us, ‘Here’s what I do and here’s what it does for me,’ ” he says. “We learn a lot at the market.”

Cut-flower farmers grow blooms on a scale home gardeners can't copy, but it's not hard to grow your own backyard bouquets, say Pov and Chasamone Huns, who sell tulips, peonies, zinnias and other flowers at the City Market.

Last fall, Pov Huns planted 10,000 tulips for market sales. Chasamone Huns is growing zinnias in a greenhouse right now, but she sows seeds outdoors three times during the summer, so she will have plenty of fresh flowers. You can even plant a late crop of zinnias in early August, she says.

Sunflowers need hot weather to grow and bloom, but this year Chasamone Huns started seeds in a greenhouse as an experiment. She recommends big ProCut sunflowers, which do not produce pollen. "They're the best, and they last longer, seven to 10 days," she says.

Chasamone Huns also has worked out the timing for cut peonies. She cuts long stems just when the buds are about to open. If you wait, the flowers will not last as long, she says.

Every year is different, market gardeners say. One year the beans are late, the next year the strawberries are early. It can be frustrating, but it's still satisfying when you can pop a warm cherry tomato in your mouth in the garden, pinch off a sprig of parsley or set the table with a big bouquet of zinnias you've grown yourself.

"The itch to garden for most people is strong and getting stronger," says Katie Nixon, who works in Kansas City as part of Lincoln University's Small Farmers Outreach Program. You don't have to have a farm to grow your own food, she says. "The potential is there, and if you want to do it, there's nothing stopping you."

RESOURCES

•The Kansas City Center for Urban Agriculture's biennial tour of urban farms and gardens is scheduled from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. June 25 and 26. Pre-tour plans include events and activities for children, families and adults. For more information about local farms, go to www.kccua.org. Tour details are at <http://urbanfarmstourkc.com>.

Links to local farms and market gardeners:

•**Kurlbaum Tomatoes:** www.kurlbaumtomatoes.com

•**Stony Crest Urban Farm:** On Facebook

•**Peas on Earth Urban Farm:** On Facebook

•**Sullivan's Greenhouse:**www.sullivansgreenhouse.com

•**Pantry Garden Herbs:** www.pantrygardenherbs.com

•**Huns Garden:** www.hunsgarden.com

•**Nature's Choice Biodynamic Farm:** Search "Fred Messner" on Facebook. Messner will teach gardening seminars at the City Market and at the farm this summer.

Seed racks at local garden shops are stocked now. Good sources for seeds are:

•**Burpee:** www.burpee.com

•**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds:** www.rareseeds.com

•**Seed Savers Exchange:**www.seedsavers.org

•**Renee's Garden Seeds:**www.reneesgarden.com

TIP-TOP TOMATOES

When you grow tomatoes, summers are sweet. Last year, Sky Kurlbaum and his family harvested about 15,000 pounds of tomatoes on their urban farm in Kansas City, Kan. They specialize in heirloom tomatoes — 40 varieties — which they sell to restaurants and grocery stores and donate to food kitchens. "We're looking forward to a big year this year," Kurlbaum says.

The tomato season starts now, Kurlbaum says. Last month, he started planting tomato seeds in his basement. He sows seeds in damp vermiculite in a warm, dark place, and as soon as green shoots come up, he moves them to a spot under lights.

Seedlings are transplanted into potting soil and grown in a greenhouse until Mother's Day, the traditional tomato-planting time in Kansas City. Here is Kurlbaum's planting technique:

•Dig a shallow trench for each plant, 4 to 6 inches deep.

•Water the trench with about a gallon of water.

•Lay a tomato plant on its side in the trench, with only the top of the plant just above soil level. If the plants are 8 inches tall, only 3 or 4 inches of leaves should show above the soil.

•Spread newspaper around the tomato plant, like a skirt around a Christmas tree. Just one sheet is enough.

•Mulch with hay. Mulch helps the soil retain moisture.

Kurlbaum doesn't water his tomatoes during the summer. "We rely totally on rainwater," he says, "I've been doing it for more than 10 years, and we've never had a failed crop."

MARKET GARDENERS' TIPS

Market gardeners make it look easy to grow beautiful vegetables, herbs and flowers, and they're eager to share their experience. Here are some suggestions:

- Peas, lettuce and radishes are easy to grow, so start with them, says Fred Messner of Nature's Choice Biodynamic Farm.

- Messner also recommends kale. Plant seeds now, he says.

- Take care of the soil. Don't work it when it is wet, and do not walk on your rows and compact the soil, says Alicia Ellingsworth of Kansas City Center for Urban Agriculture.

- Lightweight spun fabric row covers (available at garden shops) help speed germination and soften the impact of spring rains, Ellingsworth says. Hold the fabric down with rocks or 2-by-4s.

- Don't grow tomatoes in the same place every year. Rotate your crops, says Diane Hershberger of Stony Crest Urban Farm.

- Take a bucket to the garden when you pick flowers for bouquets, says Chasamone Huns of Huns Garden. A couple of inches of water in the bucket will be enough to give cut flowers a drink.

- Lettuce seeds need sunlight to germinate, so when you plant them, cover them only very lightly with soil, says Julie Coon of Peas on Earth Urban Farm. Try baby bok choy, she suggests, pak choy or mustard greens.

- Plant beans, lettuce and cucumber seeds every few weeks. It extends the harvest, says Laura Christensen of Blue Door Farm, and "if the bugs take one crop, another will be producing soon. You're playing the odds," she says, "and you can win."

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