

Cultivate Kansas City hopes to inspire more urban gardeners

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“If you have a piece of land or even a large flower pot, you can grow a tomato or a row of lettuce. Just get your hands in the soil. Why wouldn’t you?” says Ethne Clarke, the editor in chief of Organic Gardening

The urban farming movement is putting backyard gardening front and center. Even if your only crop is a pot of cherry tomatoes, you’re part of the fast-growing local food-gardening revival.

It’s hard to miss the signs of urban farming these days. School-yard gardens and community gardens across the city promote the pleasure of growing your own peppers, beans, greens and other edibles. Farmers’ markets emphasize local crops and the gardeners who tend them.

“We’re riding a wave — there’s a food revolution going on,” says Janet Moss, coordinator for Cultivate Kansas City’s fourth biennial urban farm tour later this month. “People are talking about food gardening like I’ve never heard it before.”

Cultivate Kansas City (formerly Kansas City Center for Urban Agriculture) has been helping urban gardeners for years. This year’s two-day tour includes 38 gardens and is designed to take some of the mystery out of growing your own vegetables. Beginning gardeners, especially, might be intimidated by seeds, transplants and hardiness zones, but there are just as many ways to succeed as there are gardeners willing to try their hand.

Kaelyn Helmer, a student at the Kansas City Art Institute, is one of the founders of Home Grown, a student community garden started this year on vacant school property on Walnut Street. The garden, fully subscribed by 15 KCAI students, will be on the tour. The design is artistic but practical (www.kcaihomegrown.wordpress.com), with raised beds edged with limestone defining a large circle, and a few whimsical round beds planted with fruits the gardeners will share.

“None of us have backyards, and I looked out my window at this space,” Helmer says. Instead of an empty lot, she envisioned raspberries, rhubarb, strawberries and asparagus. The students raised money to help pay for expenses, and Ben Sharda, director of Kansas City Community Gardens, helped them get started.

To improve the clay soil on the property, the students added lots of compost. They’re also rigging up a rainwater collection system. The garden — already a social spot for the participants — is a great place to share and pick up gardening skills.

The tour is designed to show off the many ways urban farming fits into city lives and lifestyles, says Ami Freeberg, program assistant for Cultivate Kansas City. “People come on the tour because it is a fun activity,” she says. “Some of them are growing their own food and they want to see other ways of doing it. They want to talk to farmers, volunteer and work on an urban farm. They want to connect.”

At Hoop Dog Studio Garden (www.hoopdogstudio.com/id1.html), Cathryn Simmons grows vegetables and fruit for her extended family. She and her partner, Lori Buntin, an artist, live next door to Buntin’s studio on Troost Avenue and, “because we are insane, we bought the two lots to the south of us,” Simmons says.

She grows cherry tomatoes on arbors made out of cattle fencing, plants greens in galvanized buckets with holes punched in the bottom for drainage, and cultivates corn and potatoes in raised planters. Almost everything in the garden grows in a raised bed of some kind — none of them especially large.

“You can make paradise as big or as small as you want paradise to be,” Simmons says. She makes her own compost, raises a few chickens (15 is the limit on the property), and grows enough produce to feed eight people. “It ought to cost less money to grow food yourself,” she says, and it does.

This year, Simmons says, “We’re planting everything we can” to get ready for the tour. Visitors are sometimes overwhelmed when they see the scale of the garden, but “then you see them start to think, ‘Well, I could do those buckets’ ” Simmons says, “and they start to ask questions. I didn’t start out to teach, but it’s what you end up doing, is teaching and encouraging.”

Debbie Glassberg’s edible landscape on Charlotte Street shows just how much an inexperienced but determined person can accomplish. She grows food crops along her front curb. Lettuce and greens in raised beds flank the front walk. A retaining wall, with pockets for herbs and edible flowers, runs along the property line next to the driveway. In her backyard, she planted fruit trees. She cultivates peppers and tomatoes on the flat roof of her modernist home. The landscaping is neat and organized, and the effect is delicious and delightful.

Glassberg grows more than she needs, and she shares her produce and her enthusiasm. “I make a lot of friends in the neighborhood,” she says. She grows raspberries on the fence out front, and elderberry bushes, quince and currants in the backyard. “I’m trying to figure out if I can be sustainable,” she says. “I am trying to create abundance.”

She also saves money by growing her own kale, collards, onions, beets, peas, spinach and herbs. She has only been gardening for two years. Her garden also will be open for the tour.

Urban farming starts with a package of seed, a four-pack of green peppers or lettuce plants. If you don’t live where you can grow your own, you can volunteer at a community garden or shop at a farmers market. “There is a way for every person to participate in this,” Freeberg says.

Moss has been working on pretour events, which start June 15 and will include gardening workshops, children’s activities and a picnic.

“One of the most exciting things to me is seeing good, healthy food being grown in neighborhoods that have no grocery stores,” she says. A new generation is learning to grow tomatoes and potatoes, and “they are growing food in their neighborhoods, for their neighborhoods.”

They're part of the most successful crop yet: home-grown gardeners.

ON TOUR

What: Get Your Grow On!, Cultivate Kansas City's fourth biennial urban farms and gardens tour. Thirty-eight farms and gardens will be open.

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. June 25-26

Tickets: \$8, \$16 for families (good for both days)

Pre-tour events: Begin June 15; check UrbanFarmsTourKC.com for details and a calendar of events, info about garden workshops and a map of tour sites.

GROW YOUR OWN

You don't have to rip out the lawn and plant miles of beans to be a part of urban agriculture, says Janet Moss, coordinator for Cultivate Kansas City's urban farms and gardens tour.

•**Recycled and repurposed materials:** Resourceful gardeners use packing crates, second-hand building materials, fence sections, cinder blocks, chimney flues and other inexpensive materials to make planting beds and structures.

•**Edible landscaping:** Crops are part of the beauty of these well-designed gardens. You can plant an edible edge of parsley or chives, grow eggplants along the front walk or make room for beans in a planter box.

•**Responsible water management:** Rain barrels and rain gardens help capture water during storms and keep it from rushing into drainage systems.

•**Raised beds:** A raised bed framed with bricks, rocks or standard lumber neatly defines a manageable working area. The soil in raised beds warms up earlier in the spring than soil in the ground, the beds drain better than regular garden beds and they are easy to work. You'll still have to bend over, but not as far, and because the soil in them is usually well-worked and loose, they're easy to weed.

•**Organic and sustainable gardening practices:** Yes, you can grow vegetables without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Gardeners on the tour will share tips and techniques on improving the soil with compost, companion planting to encourage beneficial insects and other organic-gardening basics.

•**Garden power:** People gravitate to community gardens, putting their skills and experience together to grow food and transform neglected spaces.

•**Gardening with children:** It is good for kids to learn where food comes from. They take an interest in the process of cultivating vegetables and flowers, and they love to eat what they grow.

•**Greenhouses, cold frames, and hoop houses:** These structures — you do not need a large property to have one — let you plant early and harvest late in the season.

•**Intensive planting:** Gardeners can make the most of small spaces by managing crops intensively, interplanting and practicing succession planting, so there is almost always something ready to harvest.

FOR THE KITCHEN

Ethne Clarke, editor in chief of Organic Gardening magazine, will give two talks in Kansas City at events surrounding the farm and garden tour.

•**The art of the kitchen garden**, 2:30 p.m. June 25 at Powell Gardens (\$10 for Garden Center Association of Greater Kansas City members and Friends of Powell Gardens; \$20 for others).

•**American influences on 20th century European garden design**, 2 p.m. June 26 at the Central branch of the Kansas City Public Library (free).

Clarke also will be a judge at Cultivate Kansas City's picnic and cook-off, 6-7:30 p.m. June 24 at Loose Park Pavilion.

Read more: <http://www.kansascity.com/2011/06/04/2917319/cultivate-kansas-city-hopes-to.html#storylink=misearch#ixzzlQbHQojzg>

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