In the Beginning . . .

THE IDEA TO WRITE *The Food Lover's Garden* came to me a few years ago. I was developing a community garden and I realized that many young (and not so young) people had little or no experience preparing vegetables from their natural state—that is, taking them from the garden to the plate. As a result, a lot of wonderful food was left to wither and rot. A very sad state of affairs!

As food prices spiral and it becomes more of a challenge to eat healthily and well, the term "home-grown" is reclaiming deeper meanings of empowerment and sustainability. It's my hope that home-grown will soon become a commonly used household expression again and that celebrations at harvest time will echo with the historically joyous significance of growing our own food. For this to happen, knowing what to do with the gaggle of garden goodies is just as important as knowing how to grow them in the first place. That's what this book's about: a how-to on the full meal deal, so to speak.

Necessity is indeed the mother of invention but I don't want the element of need to overshadow the more glorious benefits of eating food we've grown ourselves. For one thing, we can be sure such food has not been laced with any toxic additives at any stage of its production; for another we will be tasting truly fresh, picked when perfectly ripe, food as it's supposed to taste, guaranteed to have more flavor

and be infinitely more delicious than anything purchased at a food-mart. Another, often neglected yet equally important benefit of "grass-roots" home food production is that a handful of beans or a handsome butternut squash we've grown ourselves will not only supply high quality nutrition for our bodies, but will also nurture our souls to a degree that has to be experienced to be believed. We are meant to produce at least some of our own food. Of this much I'm certain.

There are so many things in today's society that we don't need and would probably be better off without, but food isn't one of them. It's a basic necessity of life, if not the prime necessity, and yet we have relatively little control over or connection to the food we eat. By now I'm doubtless starting to sound like I have an unhealthy obsession with food, but I don't think so, even though, when I see what so many people are eating and what they're training their children to eat, I'm more than saddened, I'm horrified!

Patterns of poor eating impact in such a negative way on quality of life and the benefits of eating healthily (which are many) are easy to claim. It really is a no-brainer. Poor eating habits and substandard nutrition surreptitiously steal the joy out of life. And without a doubt, life is meant to be a very joyous business.

Of course, not everyone has the facilities to grow and store all the vegetables they might need for a year, but most of us will have the opportunity to grow at least some. And then what? Sure, it's great to grow potatoes but if the only potatoes we're familiar with have always been in the form of French-fries it might be challenging to transform our crop into the many, many other taste-tempting dishes potatoes are capable of becoming. The humble potato, so often served as a bland accompaniment to "the main meal," deserves better. In essence this book is a different kind of gourmet travel guide, it traces the journey from the garden to the supper table, starting with a few seeds and ending with a plethora of mouth-watering meals.

▶ These "basil boots" prove that, with a little TLC, plants will grow just about anywhere.

I'm a competent gardener and a passable cook and had initially envisioned *The Food Lover's Garden* as a solitary project. That was before my wonderful friend and chef extraordinaire, Jennifer, began making sunchoke pâté, using the excess sunchoke (also called Jerusalem Artichoke) harvest. It was the first year I'd grown sunchokes and I'd been content to serve them simply steamed or roasted. Big mistake! Sunchoke pâté is absolutely delicious. (You can find this recipe in Chapter Fourteen.) A couple of other friends have also shared their favorite recipes to add to this eclectic selection of fab food, culinary creativity, and green thumb know-how.

The purpose of this book is to turn hesitant gardeners into avid vegetable growers who delight in eating and sharing the delicious produce they've grown. There's a special kind of joy that comes from growing your own food and my desire is to make that joy more widely available.

My plan is to keep things simple, partly by featuring veggies that are superbly (and absurdly) easy to grow, and which are also especially tasty and nutritious. Coming up with the list of what to feature turned out to be quite difficult. There are so many plants that fit those requirements and I didn't want this book to become encyclopaedic. The list of suggested crops is far from comprehensive and concentrates on the plants that produce well and offer lots of scope in the kitchen.

I live and garden on a small windswept island, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The seemingly ever-present onshore winds and summertime temperatures, which are almost always several to many degrees cooler than those inland, create their own set of challenges, and the soil is nothing to brag about either. I mention this now because I expect that most people reading this book will not have been blessed with a gently sloping, southerly facing patch of fluffy rich soil and some might even be thinking, "this would be nice someday, maybe, when…" Stop right there! With a little ingenuity and the right kind of care, gardens can sprout up and flourish in the

most unexpected places; in a leaky bucket, for instance or even in an old boot.

There are always challenges, yes, but challenges need not be deterrents and I've come to believe that a challenge can in fact be a good thing. It encourages a full assessment of any given situation and the subsequent design of a plan that will maximize on the available strengths and devise creative solutions for the potential problems. Whether we like it or not, every day is an adventure, some more exciting than others, and I do believe that flexibility is the key to enjoying both the smooth and the bumpy parts of the journey.

Flexibility in the kitchen opens up a whole world of possibilities, allowing personal preferences to give meals an inimitable bonus. Here I find myself smiling as I imagine some worst case scenarios of a chef-gone-wild, from zero to eighty, with no previous experience whatsoever. I had an Aunt a lot like that, someone with oodles of enthusiasm but without the know-how to back it up. Some of her culinary catastrophes were quite epic and I loved her the more for each and every one of them but, not to worry, I learnt a lot from her mistakes and this book will supply recipes, or at least some helpful how-tos!

The recipes which are mine are "easy-peasies" and all feature the selection of vegetables described in the Garden section of this book. Like most people I see time as a precious ingredient. I'm also passionate about healthy eating so it's pretty much a given that the recipes in this book are all simple, affordable, and highly nutritious. Good news is, they're also flexible. It's a wonderful thing to let the garden dictate what's for supper and over time it becomes second nature to substitute and reinvent, based on seasonal availability. Sadly this innate skill has been diluted over recent generations by the artificiality of commercial food supplies. Food processing and delivery systems are also robbing us of proper nutrition and, definitely, taste and texture, while at the same time introducing chemical agents into our bodies and nurturing our complete

dependency on unsustainable supply networks that can collapse at any time.

There are many excellent, common-sense reasons for growing our own food but the one that doesn't get mentioned nearly enough comes right from the heart. Yes, very simply, it's love; for one's self, for each other, and for this most beautiful planet.

"I grew this and I cooked it just for you, in my own special way." What could make a meal more special than that?

In the Garden

1

Deep Down 'n Dirty

getting started in the garden

As with most noble pursuits, some specific tools are required. In this case, exactly which tools will vary greatly depending on the size of the garden and the condition of the soil. Shopping for gardening tools is a lot like visiting a toy store—wannit, wannit, needit, gotta have… and so on, but Christmas is no doubt already a few months gone, so let's get real.

As with most things, you pretty much get what you pay for but, whereas I'm sure it would be nice to have a top of the line and coincidingly expensive spade, I'm quite happy with my mid-range one, and while I prefer the traditional look and feel of wooden shafts, I have a really bad habit of leaving tools lying around outside for extended periods, which causes the wood to swell, splinter and crack, so fiberglass shafts are definitely my wiser choice. They're also a bit lighter in weight which can make a difference over the long haul.

When I started my garden the tool I used most was a pickax, but only because my circumstances were extreme. I'm pretty certain that most new gardeners (hopefully) won't need a pick, but this tool does help to demonstrate two important points. Firstly, size. Most basic tools come in more than one size. I'm fairly short, with a light frame, so I can control a light-weight pick way more efficiently than the heavy duty clunker my husband favors. It took me a while to figure this out, but my body was very happy when I did. The other thing I learned

from my pickaxing days is that needs change over time. I almost never use a pick now, only occasionally to remove a boulder or such.

Lesson here choose tools sized appropriately and expect needs to change. For instance, a couple of levels down from a pick would be a spading fork, probably a more likely and better choice for most situations.

NECESSARY TOOLS

A spading fork is a great all round tool, perfect for breaking into hard packed ground simply by inserting the tines and rocking them back and forth to aerate the soil and allow moisture to penetrate, yet equally useful when that hard pack has been transformed into rich, fluffy soil which has produced a great harvest of, let's say leeks, to gently pry the crop from the soil.

Spades are definitely designed for digging and they come in a variety of styles and sizes. Some have a slightly rounded face, others are totally flat; some have a slightly rounded cutting edge while others have a straight edge, some taper slightly and some have a narrow ledge along the top edge for a foot to press down on. The resulting difference between each design is fairly minimal and really, a spade is a spade. They are useful for cutting through turf and such, but generally I favor a fork over a spade as I find it easier to penetrate the hard stuff and less disruptive in established gardens.

Shovels come in a range of styles similar to spades and in fact the exact designation of which is what gets a bit blurry. Shovel or spade, they're similar but not really interchangeable. The longer, straight handle of a typical shovel interferes with digging in confined areas but facilitates tossing or spreading of soil, compost, etc., over larger areas. If it's a choice between a spade or a shovel a lot will depend on the size of the garden. A modest raised bed or two might be better served by a small spade. It's all relative, and determining factors will

also include cost, as well as availability of storage space: the more tools the more space required to store them.

Hoes—once again a myriad of choices here: square or pointy edged, angled or straight, big, small. I think they're mostly designed for hilling up rows, chopping out weeds between the rows and marking drills (shallow indentations for planting seeds in rows). I used to have a triangular shaped hoe which I quite liked but then I fell in love with the three and four pronged fork hoes (sometimes called cultivators) which I use almost exclusively now.

Hand Tools

Trowels—it's definitely worth investing in a couple of good trowels. I have a deeply cupped, heavy duty dude that's great for mixing up a bucket full of soil, while the narrow, smaller trowel makes holes perfect for inserting transplants, and can dig in close without damaging adjacent roots.

Short handled fork hoes are virtually indispensable as they're perfect for loosening soil, for seeding and later for cultivating between plants. It's nice to have a couple of sizes as well as a neat little combo tool called a mattock which is both a claw and a small flat-edged hoe.

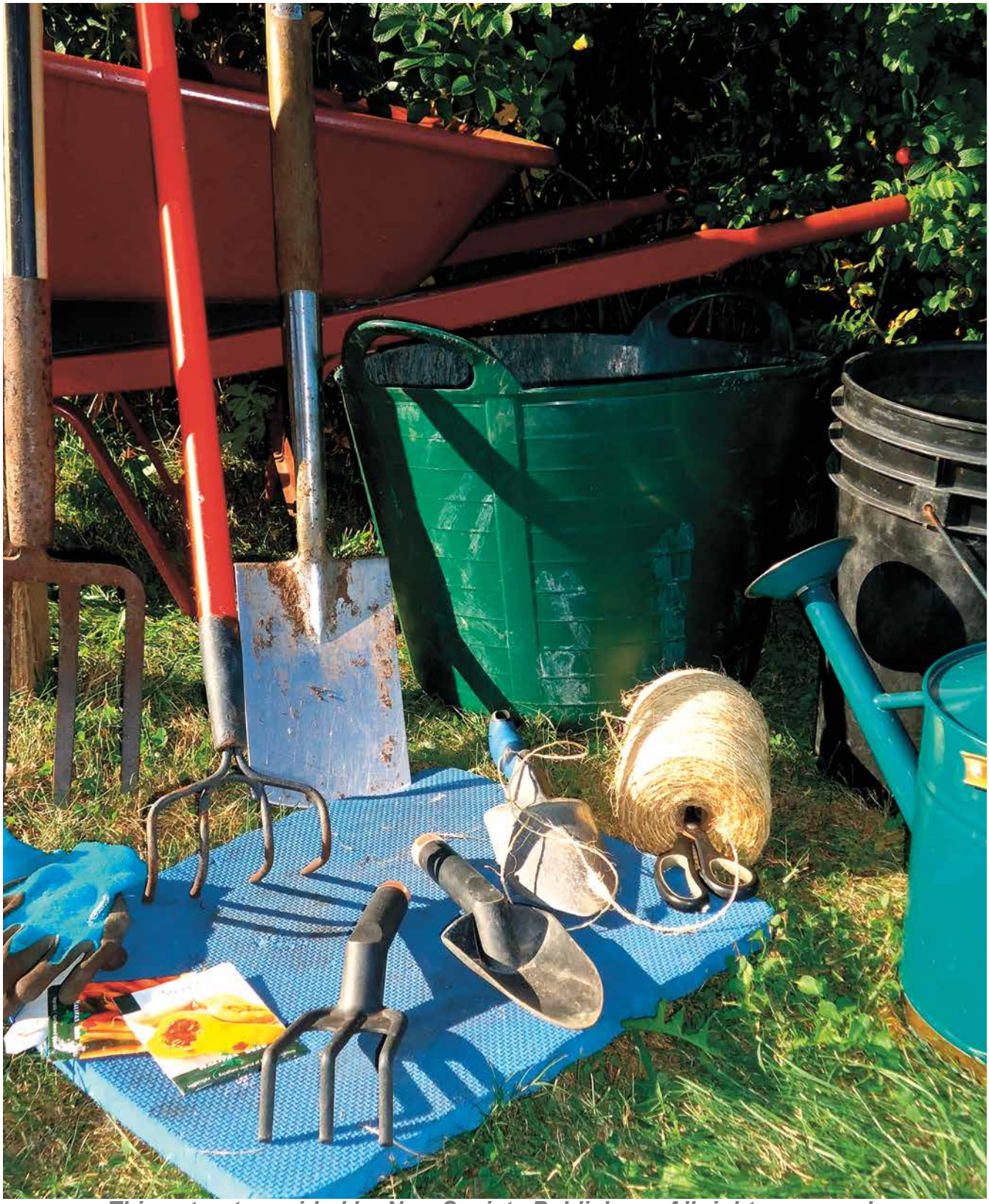
Other Essentials

A rubber kneeling mat—so much nicer than kneeling on wet, muddy ground or sharp, pointy rocks.

Well-fitting gardening gloves with rubberized palms and breathable backs—to protect hands from cuts, scrapes, splinters and thorns. The floppy cotton ones are a just plain silly as far as I'm concerned.

Buckets or recycled pails—several of these along with a few empty plant pots and a sizeable heavy gauge plastic carrier basket for green refuse, trimmings and harvesting.

▶ Tools or toys? Playing in the dirt is always fun!



A START-UP TOOL KIT

I definitely favor raised beds and smaller plots and I mulch heavily, so my tool list reflects the requirements of this method of growing food rather than the more traditional method of working one large square of tilled ground.

Thinking in terms of setting up a smallish urban garden, here is a list of equipment that I think would be necessary. This is the bare minimum starter kit and I'm sure there are a few extra tools I'd want to add over time, but I think I could manage with these.

A digging fork and a four pronged fork hoe with fiberglass shafts, both sized to fit me. Two good quality trowels and at least one hand rake. Kneeling pad and gloves, watering can and pails. A sharp knife, scissors, sturdy stakes, twine, an indelible marker and tags to label seeded rows.

I've found it very useful to tie streamers of bright orange flagging tape to the short-handled tools because they easily get misplaced in the greenery, and I always buy my gloves in bulk packs because they have a habit of slithering off to parts unknown.

Yard sales and especially moving sales are great places to pick up gardening tools and as gardening tools never stay shiny and new looking for long, used ones will give you an instant "professional" look!

A watering can—definitely one with a removable rose (the perforated spray end) as these tend to clog easily, and preferably one with measurements up the side, which are a big help when mixing up a special mid-season treat of organic plant food such as fish fertilizer.

There are so many rhythms happening in a garden and while writing this I realize that even tool use has its own sequence. During the soil prep times of early spring and late fall it's the long handled tools that come into play, while the actual seeding and nurturing of plants requires the more intimate closeness that comes with hand tools.

WHAT PLANTS NEED

To flourish, that is, to fulfill their given purpose successfully, all plants have three basic requirements: relatively good soil, water and sunlight, in degrees which vary according to the plant. Plants have personalities. Some plants are quite happy to prove that less is more by doing well with very little of some or all of these requirements, while others are just plain needy, greedy or both, giving the impression that indeed, they can't get enough of a good thing.

Despite these variations there are some generalities that can be applied to the requirements of plants. Let's start with soil. One of the keys to successful gardening depends on how we relate to our soil. Soil is definitely not an inert substance but rather a multi-faceted living community which is home to a microcosm of other living organisms, all of which are linked by a frenetically active food chain. Soil science is a far ranging topic and truly fascinating, even for a totally non-scientific intellect such as mine, but here is definitely not the place to begin such a discussion. There are, however, a few key points that need to be mentioned so that the relationship between plants and the stuff they grow in can be better appreciated.

The often used term "soil amendments" simply refers to anything that is added to improve the quality (and therefore the efficiency) of the soil. These amendments fall into two general categories: additives that will improve the texture of the soil and additives that will

improve its chemical profile. In terms of the human body these could be loosely represented by fibre, proteins and vitamins.

WHAT SOIL NEEDS

There are many types of soil, ranging from sandy to hard packed clay, which all consist of varying amounts of organic matter, silt, grit and stone. Bulk is important in sandy soil because it helps to prevent erosion and loss of nutrients through leaching. Bulk (think fiber) also helps to make clay soil more friable (fluffier) and it creates spaces where oxygen and moisture can penetrate.

Mulch, initially, is a layer of organic material applied to the surface of the soil to supress weed growth and help maintain moisture in the summer months, and to protect the soil from packing and leaching during the winter. Over time, good organic mulch, such as seaweed, leaves, grass clippings and straw will provide bulk and will also release a host of nutrients as it rots down.

Nutrients are grouped into Macro and Micro categories. Often, macronutrients are given more consideration than micronutrients because they are required in larger amounts to support healthy growth, but in fact micronutrients have an equally important role to play. There are some quirky home remedies and seemingly extreme claims for success that are based on additives from the kitchen and the medicine cabinet, such as antacid tablets, Epsom salts and banana skins. Weird as they might seem these claims are usually based on solid science—antacid tablets for calcium, Epsom salts for magnesium and banana skins for potassium and phosphorous.

The pH balance of the soil is also important to food production. Most vegetables tend to prefer a pH of around seven or slightly less. Soil that is too alkaline (over seven) can restrict nutrient absorption and result in sickly plants. Acidic soil is sometimes referred to as being “sour”, whereas alkaline soil will be called “sweet”. The pH level can usually be adjusted with the addition of some pelletized lime or wood ash to sweeten, coffee grounds to promote acidity. Simple test kits are available at garden centres which will determine

MACRO AND MICRO NUTRIENTS

Just a little basic info on soil science as it relates to plants. It’s fairly common knowledge that plants need Nitrogen (N), Phosphorous (P), Potassium (K) and Carbon (C). On typical fertilizer labels the first three are listed as three numbers such as 20-20-20, or 20-5-5 (which has four times more Nitrogen than Phosphorous and Potassium). I would highly recommend never, ever using chemical fertilizers. They are damaging to both our health and our soil.

Trace elements, which occur in minute amounts are far less familiar but equally important. They need to be in a subtle but crucial balance and it’s really much better not to mess with trace elements. They can be added as rock phosphate, green sand or granite dust if absolutely necessary. Some of the lesser macronutrients and micronutrients are Boron (B), Calcium (Ca), Copper (Cu), Iron (Fe), Magnesium (Mg), Manganese (Mn), Molybdenum (Mo), Selenium (Se), Silicon (Si), Sulphur (S) and Zinc (Zn).

Hopefully the list alone will clarify why it’s much better to rely on kelp meal and fish fertilizers, manures, organic mulches and compost for the plants’ nutritional needs.

▲ A three box composting system—kitchen waste in one end, fluffy rich growing medium out the other.

whether this is necessary. Testing the pH level is not an essential procedure but it never hurts to do a little trouble shooting prior to planting in order to avoid potential disappointment.

Compost is the truly magical ingredient that plays a huge role in the development of healthy plants and vigorous plant growth. Compost is made by piling organic food waste and plant material and encouraging aerobic (that is aerated) decomposition. Compost encourages an infinite number of microscopic nematodes and protozoa to proliferate in the soil and become part of a complex food web that consists of worms, beetles and a host of other insects, bacteria and fungi, who all do their part in breaking down the cellulose fibres in organic bulk and transforming them into sugars that can be taken up by the delicate root hairs of the plants.

That's a very simple explanation of the relationship between plants and their growing medium but hopefully it's enough to stress the fact that an adequate food source for plants depends on a number of factors and not solely on the pre-existing nature of the soil. The pre-existing soil in my garden was pretty much solid clay topped with a scant layer of humus. It was highly acidic and not in the least hospitable to most plants. The soil I grow in now has been "transformed" over several years by the addition of much organic bulk, a variety of manures, and compost, into a fertile oasis that produces abundant crops of the most delicious vegetables. It definitely can be done with just a little effort and a bit of know-how!

CREATING GARDEN BEDS

There are several ways to construct a garden bed. A generation ago the most common way was to till or dig up whatever ground was available and sprinkle in some chemical fertilizer. Yikes! Fortunately chemical fertilizers are being recognized for what they are: a threat to our health and the health of our soil, and digging is being replaced by more efficient techniques.

The two methods I favor are raised bed and lasagna gardens. They are actually somewhat similar and equally simple to construct.

Raised Bed Gardens are built up on top of the existing ground, usually using a wooden frame. The frame is then filled with a fertile mix of soil, compost and manure. Raised beds can be any shape but are usually square or oblong depending on the space you have to work with. The important thing to remember about raised beds is that they're never trodden on. Because the soil is never compressed it remains light and fluffy. Oblong beds are not more than four feet wide to allow an easy access to the centre of the bed from either side. Eight inches or deeper is an optimum depth for soil in a raised bed.

The Lasagna Bed is another popular and highly efficient method of creating a growing place. The lasagna bed is quite similar to a raised bed in that the growing area is created on top of the existing ground level and, therefore, does not require any strenuous digging.

Lasagna beds are well named as they're composed of layers, much like the similarly named pasta dish. In this case the layers consist of organic materials such as grass clippings, leaves, seaweed, spoiled straw, manure and compost interspersed with occasional layers of soil. Note: two thin layers of an ingredient are much more effective than one thicker layer.

Each of these layers or ingredients adds its own particular set of nutrients to the mix and I'm sure that all the insects and microbes go crazy trying to decide where they like to hang out the most. It's their activity that will blend the layers into amazingly fertile soil.

COMPOST

Just about anything organic can be composted, within reason of course. The process is simple enough: food waste, grass clippings, manure, leaves, etc., are layered, perhaps with a little soil and forest duff, in a pile, usually enclosed with wire mesh or wooden slats. When a sizeable amount has been collected the pile is turned regularly to aerate it. This important step prevents the compost pile from turning into a slimy, smelling mess by causing the ingredients to breakdown anaerobically, that is, without air. Simple guidelines for managing compost: if it smells—it's too wet, if it has ants living in it—it's too dry.

▲ Raised beds in winter.

▲ Raised beds in early spring.

▲ Raised beds in early summer.

▲ Spring greens growing in an old tractor tire.

First off, cover the chosen plot with newspaper and then cardboard. A couple of layers is better than one, if supply permits. This really important first step ensures that no pernicious weeds (weeds with root systems designed to take over the planet) can force their way up into the garden. Mulching with cardboard might seem weird but this is a simple yet effective way to deter already well-established weeds from reappearing. It also holds water well and over time will break down providing more organic matter.

The ingredients of a lasagna bed can be roughly grouped as green (grass clippings, kitchen waste and other fresh plant material) or brown (straw, dead leaves and soil) and it's a good idea to alternate between green and brown layers as much as possible. A little compost goes a long way by importing trillions of hard working bacteria

and more than a few worms, and certainly more than one layer of compost will push the decomposition process into overdrive. Fresh manure, which is referred to as being "hot," will also speed up the process by heating everything up, but it should only be placed in the lower layers of the bed so that the delicate roots of plants will not reach it and get "burned." (Normally manure should be aged for at least a year before it's applied to the soil.)

The top layer of the bed will be soil which is then covered with straw or dry leaves to prevent any weed seeds sprouting on the surface. Ideally a lasagna bed should be set up in the fall so it has the winter to meld into a rich, fluffy growing medium but shallow rooted plants can thrive in a newly established lasagna bed, especially if the top layer of soil is fairly thick (a minimum 2 inches) and the bed is kept well-watered.

The area chosen for any garden bed should have full sun all day or at least as close to that as possible. It should not be heavily shadowed by large trees because while the branches are stealing light, the roots of the trees will be gobbling up nutrients intended for the veggies. Dense shrubbery and small trees reasonably close by are not such a problem and in fact might provide a welcomed wind break.

Both of these methods of creating garden beds produce very fertile soil which can be densely planted, because there's plenty of plant food to go around. So, even if the area you have to work with initially might seem to be insufficient, don't be discouraged. You will be amazed at how much food even a large pot or a well-tended window box can produce. But be warned, growing food is addictive! You may be starting with a two foot by four foot box on a sunny balcony, but keep in mind how the journey of a thousand miles begins. :)

Now that the nitty-gritty dirt building stuff has been dealt with it's time to plant—well, at least to consider what to plant. Drum roll please, as I present the list of suggestions: all versatile, tasty and super easy to grow vegetables with a sprinkle of herbs and flowers thrown in for a little extra pizzazz. I have grouped the vegetables, two to a chapter, and have listed them accordingly.

▶ Nasturtiums blooming happily in poor soil by the path to the feed shed.

WHAT TO GROW

Potatoes and Leeks
Beets and Greens (summer and winter)
Squash and Garlic
Beans and Onions
Tomatoes and Cucumbers

Selected Herbs

Chives
Parsley
Summer Savory
Dill
Mint
Cilantro / Coriander

Perennials (they come up year after year)

Rhubarb
Egyptian Onions
Sunchokes
Blackcurrants
Chamomile

Just a Couple of Edible Flowers

Nasturtiums
Poppies—for their seeds.

NB only two species of poppy seeds are edible (when cooked): *papaver somniferum* and *papaver paeoniflorum*, so it's important to know exactly what type of poppy you're planting.

Some of the edibles on the list might not be your super favorites, and some you might even think you don't like one bit, but trust me, such preconceived notions might need revising come harvest time, with all those fresh picked flavors coming straight from your very own garden.