

GROWING COMMUNITY

by Cheryl Caruolo

As I dip a third tortilla chip, I compliment, “I’m not a fan of salsa, but this is terrific!”

“It’s made with tomatoes, jalapeño peppers, and herbs straight from that garden,” Ann answers, as she points behind her toward a garden in her side yard.

Ann Duhaime, a school bus driver, yoga teacher, and former hotel and restaurant management professional, lives on the south coast of Massachusetts in North Dighton. A New England native, she grew up, with one sister and four brothers, in southern New Hampshire, where she was active in sports and loved cooking. By the time she left for college, first in New York and then in South Carolina, she had tended many gardens, alongside her maternal grandfather, whom she called Pepere (pep-pay), and her mom, Jacqueline.

Ann worked in resorts in the South—Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama—for nearly a decade, until a job offer in 1996 to direct the food program for a local college beckoned her, her husband, and their recently-born daughter back to New England. The summer of 2010 brought the southern heat Ann remembers from living in Alabama, where she recalls harvesting tomatoes and Swiss chard into November.

Every season, Ann plants the usual suspects—tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers—then each year, she adds something different to the mix. Last season she brought back a butter lettuce plant from a trip to Maine. She adds marigold flowers between rows of vegetables to deter insects—a trick she learned from her mother—which keeps the yield healthy and pesticide-free. This season she is setting her sights on raising pumpkins and watermelon. She is still working out the kinks of nurturing carrots and beets in shallow soil.

A couple of years ago, Ann’s brother gave her strawberry plants. “I found out how fast strawberries take over!” she laughs. “A lot of gardening is trial and error, but so what? Local fresh strawberries are great encouragement.”

When she describes how meditative she finds working the garden, Ann’s blue eyes widen. She speaks of how much it relaxes her. How excited she feels when a crop, especially a newly attempted one, sprouts. She shrugs her shoulders when she talks about how she tries to figure out whether a failure was simply the wrong crop for the soil. She chuckles when she says she found a bush full of blackberries hiding in a corner...which she swears she never planted.



“A lot of people think you need special skills and expensive tools to create a garden. All you need is a desire, a willingness to ask questions, and patience. It’s work, but it’s rewarding.”

Ann’s garden is more than a way to stretch her food budget. The humble garden also feeds neighbors and friends. And they all tend to it with the same enthusiasm and respect. One neighbor makes sure the garden is watered when Ann is away; another collaborates on which new veggies she should try each season. One friend helps Ann till the soil in exchange for some of its yield, while another grabs some goodies on her way back from her morning run. In short, Ann’s unpretentious garden grows community.

As much as she appreciates the help, Ann is most at peace in the garden when followed by Tibet, a feral cat who showed up about five years ago. Whenever she heads to the rich patch of ground, Tibet appears, seemingly out of nowhere. He tags behind her, or naps between the rows as she pulls weeds and checks crop conditions. And when she is done and heads out of the garden, Tibet vanishes into the woods that border Ann’s property. Ann also feels closest to her grandfather when she is in the garden. She is honored to be continuing a family history that they shared. A history of relating to nature that meant so much to him and her mother. A history of healthy living she is passing on to her children.

When you ask Ann about her favorite part of having a garden, she smiles. “Towards the end of the season, my sister Rachel travels down from New Hampshire, often with my mom, up from Florida, and we can jars—endless jars—to last throughout the coming winter. Days of boiling tomatoes, pickling zucchini relish, and drying herbs. And days of reminiscing.”

A few days after I spoke with Ann, she called to tell me something she discovered subsequent to our visit. As with many families and traditions, Ann’s love of gardening was passed from generation to generation. She knew that her maternal great-grandfather cultivated a huge garden in Manchester, New Hampshire in the 1940s. She knew that her mother and her Aunt Jeanette dragged home a red wagon filled with fresh vegetables from that garden nearly every day. What she didn’t know was that the garden was on the grounds where her great-grandfather worked as a caretaker—a mile away—in Manchester’s St. Augustine Cemetery. Ann’s great-grandparents, her beloved Pepere, and his wife are now buried in St. Augustine’s. And that arc of life is perhaps the best illustration of our inseparable connection to the earth.

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but this is terrific!”*

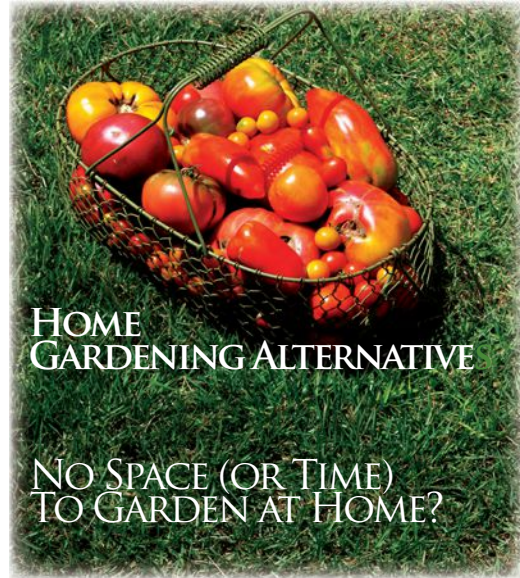


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GARDEN SALSA

- 10 firm ripe red plum or roma tomatoes, diced
- 1 medium green bell pepper, diced
- 1 red onion, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 fresh jalapeno peppers (or to taste), diced
- 2 cups drained cooked black beans (either home-cooked from dry, or rinsed and drained canned)
- sweet corn cut from 6 steamed ears
- 1 bunch fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 tablespoon cumin seed, ground
- 2 teaspoons chili powder
- juice of 2 limes
- kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Mix it all together and adjust seasonings to your taste.



HOME GARDENING ALTERNATIVE

NO SPACE (OR TIME) TO GARDEN AT HOME?

Consider these alternatives:

Community Garden – If you want to grow your own veggies but you don’t have space at home for a plot of your own, you can rent one from a community garden. Most towns offer them these days—even in the city! Grow what you like; experiment with different methods. Ground rules differ from town to town.

Container Gardening – Almost everyone has room for a few outdoor pots. Find a sunny spot and grow your own tomatoes and basil, for example, or some herbs or lettuce. Decks, balconies, and other uncovered spaces are ideal.

Join a CSA – No time to work in the soil? Buy a share in a farm that’s run by a pro. Your CSA may or may not require you to log a few hours in the fields during the season. But either way, you’ll receive a weekly portion of the harvest. You’ll be supporting a farmer directly, and gaining first-hand knowledge of how your food is produced.

Visit the Farmers’ Market – If you can’t grow your own fresh produce, you can still buy it, week after week, from local growers. The farmers’ market offers an extensive variety of just-picked produce, plus the opportunity to compare prices and meet the farmers. Plus, you’ll feel a wonderful sense of community.

Frequent a Roadside Stand – There’s one in every town—some large, some small. Eggs, seedlings, fruit, vegetables . . . see what farmers and backyard gardeners have to offer at these seasonal stands. Visit www.farmfresh.org to find a farm stand near you.

Collaborate With Neighbors – Does your neighbor have a garden? Would he or she be willing to grow more food, in exchange for money or as barter? Or maybe he or she has enough room to let you “homestead” some cucumbers and peas of your own. Lean over the fence and inquire.

Delivery Services – Family-owned South Shore Organics delivers fresh local and organic produce directly to your home. There is no commitment, and you can order anytime. How easy is that? For details, visit www.southshoreorganics.com.