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Out with the lawn, in with edibles

Urban growers bringing their own produce to the table

By LISA STIFFLER, P-I REPORTER

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Colin McCrate, owner of Seattle Urban Farm Co., helps Megan Haas get a kitchen garden started in front of her Central District home Thursday. Photo: Paul Joseph Brown/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Gesturing to a patch of dirt lined by rocks and driftwood, [Megan Haas](#) proclaims that basil will spring forth from the soon-to-be "pesto section" of her petite front yard.

Where a lawn once greeted visitors to Haas' modest [Central District house](#), hardy oregano, thyme and rosemary already are thriving. Lettuces and chard are sending out tender leaves that unfortunately invite a

party of slugs.

She hopes another squarish bed will sprout one day with Popeye-pleasing volumes of spinach.

But how do vegetables go from dirt to dinner plate?

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"If you have the will but not the knowledge, there are so many questions, like, 'Is this thing dead?' " Haas said.

Haas, a 36-year-old entrepreneur and consultant, is not alone in her produce ponderings.

There's a growing interest in turning lawns and landscapes into pesticide-free, food-yielding gardens. More urban residents are seeing the potential for growing their own fruit and vegetables, but many don't know how to dig in.

"We've seen that growth (in gardening interest) and added so many more programs recently," said [Kathy Dang](#), a teacher at Seattle Tilth, an organic gardening non-profit group founded in 1978.

In 2001, Seattle Tilth began teaching a comprehensive organic gardening course once a year. Demand has increased that to three times a year since 2006. A February class on growing vegetables from seeds filled up and a second one was added for March. It sold out, too.

Seattle's P-patch program has about 70 community garden patches citywide. But even with enough plots for 6,000 gardeners to plant, weed and harvest, there are more than 700 people on the waiting list. Some P-patches have a three-year wait.

Earlier this year, at least two Seattle businesses were launched that will help novice gardeners navigate the garden rows of their own backyards.

[Colin McCrate](#), owner of [Seattle Urban Farm Co.](#), set up a booth at the Ballard Farmers Market selling small vegetable plants called starts.

People would come look at the starts and say to him, "I'd like to be doing this, but I have no idea what I'm doing, and I don't know where to start," he said.

Haas was one of those people.

Now McCrate is advising her on what, when and where to plant the vegetables and herbs she wants for an urban garden to satisfy her cooking needs. His company offers a range of services - even building and planting your garden beds and maintaining your plants.

"It'll save me a ton of money," Haas said. "Not having to buy herbs alone will save me money."

Organic food connection

The reasons for urbanites' growing interest in edible gardens are as numerous as the varieties of heirloom tomatoes.

In one regard, it follows a natural progression. City dwellers became devout consumers of organic fruit and vegetables, getting hooked on such grocers as PCC and Whole Foods. For some, their devotion soured when the market shifted toward mass-produced organic foods.

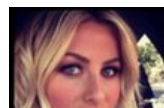
Then they became loyal farmers-market shoppers. They appreciated the energy that's saved and global warming that's prevented when an apple is shipped from Wenatchee instead of New Zealand. They got to know the sellers. It helped begin the reconnection with where food comes from and shopping for items that are in season.

Outbreaks of bacterial contamination in spinach and cantaloupe made people question their food sources.

Now the city slickers are grabbing a trowel and seed packets and growing zucchini along their front walks and parking strips. Porches are home to peppers in pots.

"We're talking about food that's traveling on average about 100 feet" from garden to table, said [Craig Cogger](#), a soil scientist with [Washington State University's](#) Puyallup branch. "It's fresh, and you know how it was grown, and it's really a way to participate in the food system."

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