

**The Seattle Times**

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**Pacific NW Magazine**

Originally published July 27, 2012 at 11:00 AM | Page modified July 27, 2012 at 1:01 PM

## Seattle pair spread the love of urban vegetable gardening

Colin McCrate and Brad Halm's book, "Food Grown Right, In Your Backyard: A Beginner's Guide to Growing Crops at Home," helps newbies without jargon.

By Valerie Easton



THE STRAIGHTFORWARD title of Colin McCrate and Brad Halm's first book couldn't be more illustrative of its contents: information, insights and step-by-step instructions suited for our climate, without jargon or talking down to newbies.

The authors have great timing. They met at a student-run organic garden at Denison University in Ohio, transplanted themselves to Seattle, and in 2007 co-founded Seattle Urban Food Company just when food gardening became du jour.

"Seattle is possibly the only place we could have made this work," says McCrate. "The whole food thing means something to this community." Lately, he's been called on to consult nationwide with people hoping to start similarly thriving businesses.

At 32 and 33 respectively, Halm and McCrate are the demographic. The majority of their clients are young urban and suburban families who hope to instill in their children a different relationship to food than the one they were raised with.

"We try to get clients past the first hurdle and keep them from too much toiling in the garden," explains Halm, who recommends people start small. A 100- to 200-square-foot garden is large enough to eat from, but not overwhelming to care for.

Boomer-era gardeners and the nursery industry hope that for Generations X and Y, vegetables will prove the gateway into ornamental gardening. Do McCrate and Halm think this is likely?

"Most of our clients see ornamental landscapes as antiquated; if they're going to feed and water the garden, they want it to be productive," says McCrate. But he admits his interests broaden the longer he gardens, and lately he's been growing shrubs and flowers as well as broccoli and cauliflower. "Most people aren't looking for urban farms. They want an integration of vegetables, space for their kids to play and ornamentals," adds Halm diplomatically.

These guys are realists who work a 1,200-square-foot test plot at their company headquarters. "There are no promises with tomatoes," cautions Halm, who says the cherry tomato 'Sungold' produces even in a bad year. Eggplants? Hit or miss ... But you'll have the best luck with the Japanese variety 'Swallow' or the Italian 'Galin.'

Is a winter vegetable garden realistic? "Better to think of it as fall gardening with a long, long harvest," suggests McCrate. He advocates growing kale, hoping that our palates shift toward what

grows best in our climate. And chard? "Kale does better in shoulder seasons than chard, which can get mildew," he says.

If Halm and McCrate had to limit their gardening to the 4-by-8-by-18-foot raised bed they say is the ideal size, what would they grow? They look like I'm killing them with this question. Halm says he'd plant space-efficient kale and salad greens. McCrate equivocates: "Cilantro, kale, 'Sungold' tomatoes, definitely ... basil, arugula ... "

What comes next for these two? Restaurants have proved to be great clients, and they'd like to green more Seattle rooftops, such as they did at Bastille Café and Bar in Ballard.

"Growing food softens the urban experience. As the city gets denser, we need more rooftop gardens downtown," says McCrate, who ponders the possibilities of more corporate clients. [Amazon.com](#) and Adobe, are you listening?

*Check out Valerie Easton's blog at [www.valeaston.com](http://www.valeaston.com).*