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## Food & Wine



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## Urban farmers help people reconnect with food

Remember when you first realized those little brown kernels inside an apple make more apples? Kate Jacobs, 2-½, made that connection...

By **Karen Gaudette**  
Seattle Times staff Reporter

Remember when you first realized those little brown kernels inside an apple make *more* apples?

Kate Jacobs, 2-½, made that connection a few weeks back. Thing is, she now thinks all food comes from seeds.

When will the noodles grow, she wondered aloud as she toddled through her newly planted vegetable garden. Where did the garden guys plant *those* seeds?

The "garden guys" are Colin McCrate and his team of overall-clad farmers. They run Seattle Urban Farm, a business that aims to instill the joy of gardening in those who can't tell arugula from a rutabaga, or those who know their produce but just prefer to outsource the complicated stuff.

Kate's mom, Martha Jacobs, can't help but laugh watching her daughter cavort amid the beets, kale and celeriac. And she finds herself with yet another reason she's glad for the garden in her front yard on the border of Seattle's Maple Leaf and Northgate neighborhoods.

So Kate can learn where food comes from.

So her daughter and her 11-year-old son, Elliott, will grow to love vegetables like their parents.

So she can have the garden she always wanted but lacked the time and know-how to handle.

"This is the hit of the neighborhood, the first garden where there are actually vegetables," Jacobs said, watching Kate follow McCrate and Brad Halm as they water the seedlings, her own pint-size watering can in hand. "These guys are perfect for that."

### They do the work

Once upon a time, gardening in one's yard within the city limits wasn't so much trend or hobby as necessity. Gardens sustained many a family during the Great Depression. Victory gardens during World War II provided produce staples when nearly everything was rationed.

These days, a garden of one's own is one way to wield maximum control over the food we eat and to enjoy the freshest food possible. How else to know what exactly made the pumpkins grow so fat, the corn so tall or the lettuce so lush? How better to know the path of produce and what it came across between the "fields" and your kitchen sink?



[enlarge](#) MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Colin McCrate of Seattle Urban Farm plants basil at a home near Green Lake. McCrate and his crew are in their first year of designing and setting up custom gardens for their clients.

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This is the farm company's first year planting and maintaining custom gardens. Based on the number of calls he's receiving, McCrate said he'd be surprised if he didn't see more urban-garden businesses sprout next spring.

He and his crew rumble from neighborhood to neighborhood in their truck, seedlings and garden tools lining the bed, seeds packed neatly inside a suitcase

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...ing the seed, seeds packed neatly inside a suitcase to keep dry.

For anywhere from \$300 to \$1,500 they eyeball the space, design a custom garden with your favorite veggies, haul away what's in the way, till the earth, lay irrigation tubes, plant the seeds and set a watering timer on your faucet. For \$600 more, they'll come back

each week of the growing season to weed, hoe, fertilize and tend. If you're so inclined, they'll even harvest for you, though to pluck sugar snap peas off the vine or nibble nasturtiums is the fun part.

## Step 2: Do it yourself

McCrate grew up in Ohio, sans garden, and fell into farming during college and loved it. He worked on farms from Pennsylvania to Poulsbo. He grew to believe the best way to interest people in the source of their produce was to bring the produce to them.

"It's just trying to find another way to help people reconnect with their food," McCrate said.

His crew began planting in March and will plant through the summer. Customers — about 20 so far — run the gamut but many are young couples with kids, "people who've just moved into a home and are trying to figure out what to do with their space, and kind of revamping it," McCrate said. Most are first-time gardeners who don't know watercress from a weed.

Gardens are customized down to the last row. If you love carrots, you get carrots. Don't like beets? They'll listen, and plant something else.

"At least they are aware of their eating habits. But it's unfortunate they're not willing to try and expand," McCrate said. "Something you've grown at home tastes a whole lot better. I'll say 'I'm going to plant a couple kohlrabi because you need to try it.'"

His ultimate goal is for customers to like gardening so much, they'll do it themselves. In the fall, he hopes to lead a jam-making and canning class, so his customers learn how to preserve all that abundance.

"You want to make sure everyone's successful this year so they actually get enchanted with it, and want to keep doing it forever."

## Reconnecting

Jennifer Sill is on her way. The mother of two boys is enjoying fresh lettuce from her tidy garden near Green Lake. Neat rows of peas, summer squash and fennel hug the back of her blue house.

She grew up with a garden and remembers pulling carrots and picking apples and has been soaking in gardening tips. She was thrilled when son Max, 9, picked his first radish, beaming.

It was good, sweet, "the best radish ever."

"I think when our tomatoes go gangbusters, maybe the kids will want to have a tomato stand, like a lemonade stand," Sill said.

"I can only see it being a good thing for everybody — kids and grown-ups, just a back-to-the-earth type of thing."

Karen Gaudette: 206-515-5618 or [kgaudette@seattletimes.com](mailto:kgaudette@seattletimes.com)

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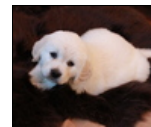
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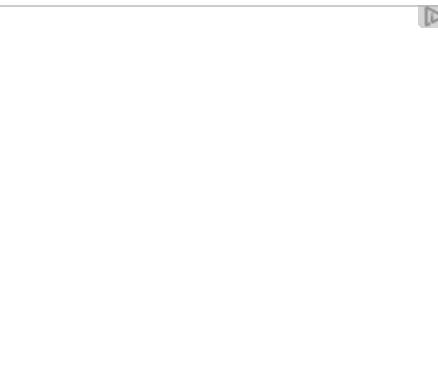
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