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# Garden-variety meals: Grow your own organic veggies, fruits and even nuts

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Desiree Fields hasn't paid for produce in years — unless you count garden supplies.

Working from her small lot in southern [Broward County](#), the personal chef and avid gardener grows everything she eats in her organic garden.

One of the attractive aspects to growing your own food these days, like Fields does, is saving money at the grocery store.

When she first started growing her own food, she compared her grocery bill to the cost of raising her own produce. Once she calculated the cost of soil, mulch and supplies, it wasn't much of a bargain.

Over time, however, as her garden became established, her out-of-pocket expenses dropped dramatically. Today, Fields says she has a steady, varied supply of organic fruits and vegetables that are virtually free.

### Grow dinner

Besides, there are other benefits.

"A garden is like a pet," she says. "Children are drawn to my garden. Their hearts leap when they see it, and I get my compliments that way."

Growing her own food is her philosophy, and she enjoys a year-round abundance of vegetables, herbs, tropical nuts and fruits.

"The food I grow is healthy and beautiful," she says. "When we cook from scratch, we're talking about growing the food that goes into the meal."



While few people would go as far as Fields, who avidly experiments with outdoor hydroponics, collecting seeds and growing multiple hybrids of the same plant, she says anything can be grown in South Florida if you're willing to work at it.

Even asparagus.

"I was determined to grow asparagus because I loved it," she said. "People told me, 'You can't grow asparagus in Florida.' I said no one's written me a ticket. I grow it now."

The same is true for nectarines, lettuce in August, and other plants that aren't supposed to do well here. Even her hedges are edible.

### **Diversity first**

What's her secret? Lots of experimentation, planning and a passion for plants.

"A lot of my planning is strategic," Fields says. "What kind of soil do I have? What do you like to eat? You can get a lot of seeds from the grocery store, especially if you get locally grown produce."

In other words, plant it and see what happens.

"It's a question of organizing things properly," she says. "Plant things in different parts of the yard and see where it will survive. A lot of things I learned were trial and error. Some things will succeed in one house, but not the next."

With the sky-high cost of produce today, coupled with concerns over food safety and the use of chemicals, growing your own produce is increasingly appealing. And while Fields makes it sound easy, even she went through a transition period as she adjusted to her plot of land.

One of the bedrocks of her philosophy is diversity. Her garden is loaded with different species of plants. According to Fields, monocropping or planting only one or two kinds of tasty delights, is like laying out a buffet for bugs. If you're a tomato horn worm, imagine your joy at discovering a yard with 17 huge tomato plants.

### **Organic advice**

As an organic gardener, she uses no pesticides and fertilizes only with a certified-organic pelletized chicken manure product.

"In the beginning, I was using soap sprays and safe measures for bugs," she says. "But after a while, it hit a point where it was self-sustaining. When you go organic and you have a huge variety of plants and avoid monocropping, you don't have bugs."

Plant diversity also encourages healthier soil. Before the advent of chemical agriculture, farmers knew they

had to rotate crops in order to keep the soil fresh and producing. The same is true in your home garden.

Fields is also a strong believer in mulching and soil improvement. Most vegetables prefer a more acidic soil than Florida offers, so Fields amends her soil with compost. Lime and coffee grounds can also raise the soil's pH.

The best way to control the soil, Fields says, is to use raised flower beds.

"Raised flower beds are definitely the way to go," she says. She also uses containers and a special kind of outdoor growing system called EarthBoxes (available at [www.earthbox.com](http://www.earthbox.com)).

In a pinch, she's even experimented with growing plants in bagged potting soil.

"You just lay the bag down on its side, cut holes in the surface of the bag and put the plants in," she says. "Make sure the holes are large enough that water can get in when it rains, and put holes in the bottom, too, so it doesn't get too soggy."

Finally, you should never water your vegetables and edibles at night, because it will encourage fungal diseases.

Jon VanZile is a home gardener and freelance writer. He lives in Tamarac.

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