

Growing veggies at home

Gardening is a wonderful activity for me; it helps stiff joints stay limber for longer, and simply looking as a seedling develops can be full of magical moments. Not everyone shares my excitement, and there are times when I must clarify why it is such an important activity. Whenever someone asks if growing vegetables in a home garden is a good use of natural resources, I often give a nuanced answer, one that is not purely positive. “It depends” can be my operative phrase, determined by the replies to several questions.

One important query is – how much money will it cost to establish and maintain a garden? If having a garden is as much a hobby as it is a source of produce, then this is not a major factor, although no one really wants to be the person who grew a \$100 tomato.

On the other hand, asking “how much water will the enterprise take?” might be truly significant here in the drought-stricken Mojave Desert. It might seem unlikely, but gardening can actually be water-thrifty, as long as the grower is attentive, not overwatering or permitting irrigation valves to leak.

Why would anyone want all the extra work involved in preparing, planning, planting and harvesting, when it is so easy to go to a grocery store produce aisle, and buy a head of cabbage or a bunch of carrots?

Compared to vegetables that are available in a supermarket, garden-fresh is so much better. Tasty, crunchy, and just-picked – could anything be more delicious? Growing one’s own vegetables does even more than simply provide food with improved taste and texture; it may actually provide increased nutrition than store-bought.

An important series of articles appeared in several scientific journals demonstrated that the nutrient levels of a number of vegetables has decreased over the past 50 to 100 years. This certainly does not mean one should give up on them – even with a reduced concentration of vitamins and minerals, they are still essential eating!

Why would there be a decline in nutrient levels? How is this possible, given the improvements in plant yields and modern protection from pests (weeds, diseases, and insects)?

The improvement in yields could actually be a cause of the decrease. There is a limited amount of resources available in the soil, and modern agriculture is not known for replenishing them. The result of terrific yields is that the limited supply must be spread among a larger amount of produce. Fertility management using only soluble fertilizers is not enough to refresh everything that is taken out of the soil by growing plants.

Good gardeners know that crop rotation, i.e. not planting the same thing in the same spot year after year, will help keep pests down. Adding compost and “green manure” will restore many of the essential nutrients, and this is where the home gardener is at an advantage relative to a large commercial grower. Soil that is regularly replenished will produce vegetables that have better levels of nutrients. That means vegetable gardening is a very good use of natural resources and does not use them up.

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