

# Salad on your doorstep

## Latest gardening trend takes boomers back to their roots

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM   APRIL 28, 2010



This ornamental pot holds a tomato plant, lavender, potato vine.

**Photograph by:** John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — If you grew up in the '60s, you probably watched your parents toil in the soil of a vegetable patch that consumed half the backyard. After leaving home, you likely never had the space or the time to tend a garden plot.

"Boomers didn't learn gardening," said Deborah Sirman, co-owner of the year-round Greenland Gardening Centre in Strathcona County. "Mom dropped off veggies from her garden on her daughter's doorstep, because her daughter didn't have time to garden."

Fifty years later, vegetable gardening is back in vogue and boomers are going back to their childhood roots to grow their own.

But this is not your mother's garden.

According to recent North American garden surveys, container gardening is the latest trend in growing your own vegetables, and Sirman says their plant sales last year confirmed the trend has taken root in Alberta.

"We weren't prepared for how quickly it took off," says Sirman, the home and decor buyer for the centre, which in February was named by the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association as Canada's Best Garden Centre for 2009.



"By May 15 last year, the sale of tomatoes had doubled tomato sales from the entire previous year. People were buying up tomato baskets for Mother's Day gifts. By early June, we were sold out of herbs, cucumbers and peppers."

Sirman, whose family-owned business celebrates its 50th anniversary in May, thinks the growth in vegetable gardening is a sign of the times. When coupled with other ecological and organic trends that have been swirling around the past few years, last year's recession whipped up the perfect storm for growing your own veggies to trim the grocery bill.

"A study done in 2009 showed that a family could save hundreds of dollars in one season by growing their own vegetables," says Sirman, noting that schoolchildren are appreciating their parents' eco-friendly efforts.

"Our generation missed out on gardening, and we want to teach our children how to plant their own food. Vegetable container gardening is a great way to do that."

Sirman, who still recalls shelling peas at age four from her mother's garden, says basil and tomatoes are staples on her back deck.

Growing vegetables in containers is convenient, low maintenance and high yielding, and can make an attractive display on any patio, deck or balcony.

It's ideal for the apartment/condo dweller, RVer, novice gardener, the less mobile elderly or disabled, or those who simply don't have the time or the room for a garden anymore.

Sirman says high-yield container gardens can double the growth of a conventional garden. Vegetables grown in the ground have to contend with insects, moisture and wind, whereas containers, which use a moisture-retaining soilless mix, can be positioned close to the house to provide a more controlled environment for the plants.

"If it hails, you can cover them up," Sirman notes.

Containers also let you harvest your produce earlier than a lawn garden. "You could be eating vegetables from a container garden by the end of June or beginning of July."

For those who want minimal maintenance and maximum yield, Greenland sells the EarthBox, a high-yield, high-tech growing system that self waters and self fertilizes. The portable EarthBox has a water reservoir at the bottom, a fertilizer strip on top of the potting soil and a plastic cover to protect the potting mix. It measures 29 inches (73 cm) long, 11 inches (28 cm) high and 13.5 inches (34 cm) wide.

Buying the rightsized container for the plants you want to grow together is also important. Sirman advises: "Read the package labels and be sure to leave the proper amount of space for the roots to develop and plants to grow to the correct size and produce the most vegetables."

She said container gardens should get at least six to eight hours of full sun a day.

If you start a container in May, place it in a sunny window or outside during the day and bring it in at night. Come early June, you can leave it outside for the summer.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

— Mix decorative and useful plants that have similar needs for sun and water in the same pot. Be creative and add edible flowers for flavour and garnishes such as pansies, nasturtiums or marigolds.



- Make a kitchen container garden of your favourite herbs, like chives and basil, and add a compact tomato varietal and marigolds.
- Or make a fresh garden salad container with lettuce, upright cucumbers on a trellis, chives and trailing mint.
- Select a package of red leaf lettuce and re-harvest all summer, adding a few more seeds from the package after you pick the lettuce.
- Got a bare, shady spot on the patio? Fill it with an ornamental container teamed with lettuce, spinach and pansies.
- Compact herb containers make great gifts, too. Greenland offers pre-potted Greek- and Italian-flavoured herb arrangements with recipe cards.

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