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Know-how

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Gardens of eatin'

Community plots give vegetable lovers some room to grow

By Nancy Maes

It's that time again, when glorious seed catalogues start filling mailboxes with tempting visions of lush colors and abundant harvests. And, for vegetable gardeners without back-yard space, it's time to stake a claim to plots in community gardens.

But before you sow your seeds in any of the many community garden plots available throughout the city and suburbs, it's wise to take some advice from gardening experts.

Vernon Bryant, an adviser with the Urban Gardening for Food Production Program of the Illinois Cooperative Extension, recommends planning before



Space for community gardeners is available throughout the city and suburbs, and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe will even help some groups get started.

buying seeds and plants. He suggests drawing a very simple diagram of your garden plot, so you will know how much you will need to buy. "Each plant has specific spacing recommendations for it to get the best production," Bryant says. "Often people will just go out and buy without thinking about spacing, and they usually end up over-buying and having excess they throw away or give away."

There is also the temptation to plant as much as you possibly can, but that can sometimes be wasteful. Cliff Zenor, urban horticulturist with the Gardening Resources on Wheels (GROW) Program at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, cautions gardeners to grow only the kinds of foods they want to eat. "Don't plant things just because they are fashionable," he says. "People may think eggplant, for example, looks fun to grow, but ask yourself if your family will eat it."

Zenor also suggests growing only as much as you can eat. "It's dangerous if you continually give zucchini to your friends and neighbors," he says. "Pretty

till up the whole garden," he explains. "You can push more plants into the space, and even if the plants do compete with each other, crowding gives other benefits because the plants shade the soil, reduce weed growth and also prevent water evaporation from the soil." This high-density method of planting can be used for such vegetables as radishes, beets, carrots and onions.

Zenor says that mulching can also improve a garden's productivity. Mulch is any organic material used to cover the soil: shredded leaves, grass clippings from lawns that haven't been treated with weed killers, wood chips, chopped-up cornstalks, cocoa bean hulls. Explains Zenor: "Mulch can be anything organic that breaks down and improves the soil. It also helps suppress weed growth and conserve moisture—and it keeps your feet clean, too, when the soil is wet."

Because space is at a premium in community gardens, Bryant recommends avoiding vegetables like corn and pumpkins, which require a lot of room. Some plants that tend to spread all over the garden, however, can be grown upright on a trellis or even a chain-link fence. This is a good way to grow cucumbers, melons and snow peas, Zenor says. "It's like a high-rise building. You get more out of your real estate."

You can get the most out of the ground area by using hybrid space-saving plants such as bush-type cucumbers and zucchini. "Space-saving plants are very compact and produce a large amount of vegetables," says Bryant. "The ultimate is the patio type that you can grow in containers on your patio."

Think small

Herbs like chives, sage, thyme and oregano also thrive in small spaces. Only a few herbs, like mint, will try to invade the rest of the garden and should be planted in containers.

To get the maximum use out of the soil you have tilled, Zenor also suggests using a technique called intercropping. "Short, early-maturing crops can be planted near tall, late-maturing ones," he says, "so that by the time the early crops are ready to

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soon when they see you coming down the street with a bag of zucchini, they'll turn out the lights and pull the drapes and pretend they're not home."

Crowd control

While garden plots have traditionally been laid out in long, straight rows with walking aisles in between, another design may be more efficient for small spaces. Zenor suggests planting short, wide rows about 4 feet wide and 8 to 10 feet long. "You can put all your soil improvement efforts into the planting beds and you won't have to