

Home vegetable gardens not about saving money

DEAR MS. GREEN,

I've always had a large vegetable garden, but I'm beginning to wonder if it's really worth it to grow my own food. I understand the value of eating local and in season, but why not just join a local CSA instead?

— Perplexed in Pittsboro.

DEAR PERPLEXED,

Ms. Green completely understands where you're coming from! Ms. Green, too, raises some of her own vegetables, as well as her own eggs and honey, fruit and berries. She makes plum jam from the ancient plum tree on her property. This has all given her a great deal of satisfaction, a little exercise, and the pride of self-sufficiency, but ... she probably could have bought all of these things at a much lower price, not to mention the cost of her time, had she bought it from a farmer, the co-op, the farmer's market, or even at a local supermarket.

Between the topsoil and the heirloom starter plants and the tomato cages, the deer fence, raised beds, chicken food and the canning jars, Ms. Green's husband likes to joke that she's grown several \$200 tomatoes. Not to mention \$50 heads of broccoli, \$30 bunches of asparagus and \$5 eggs.

Now, Ms. Green has friends who have much larger gardens and small farms who manage to make the economics work for them, but based on personal experience Ms. Green suspects you are correct: you probably can buy perfectly nice, organic, locally, and happily raised produce and

other food at a similar or much lower price than you can should you grow it yourself.

But if you are really a gardener, Perplexed, then you know that's not all there is to it. Because we gardeners aren't doing it because we want to save money, we are doing it for the love of the garden. And the taste of that just picked asparagus. And the mouth-watering thought of that fresh-sliced tomato, still warm from the sun. And knowing that you grew that food yourself.

DEAR MS. GREEN,

I just bought an older home and its energy bills seem high. I'm thinking of getting new windows to help with the bills. What can you tell me about replacement windows?

— Cold in Carrboro

DEAR COLD,

Here's what Ms. Green thinks about replacement windows: contrary to what the window replacement industry will tell you, getting replacement windows is not a very good use of your energy efficiency dollars.

But they're leaky, you'll say. I can literally feel the air coming from around the jams!



No doubt, Ms. Green replies. They might be leaky. But there are better, cheaper solutions than spending \$400 and up per window, especially considering it will take 20 years (and probably more) to earn your money back in energy savings.

Let's do the math.

If a replacement window costs you \$400 (and yes, Ms. Green knows you can get windows cheaper than this, but she also knows you can pay much, much more than this, so she's sticking with \$400), and you have 15 windows in your house (again, kind of arbitrary), and you're going from single pane older windows to double-pane low-e Energy Star® windows, according to energystar.gov, you can expect to save \$247 per year in energy costs in the Southeast. (If you're going from double pane to energy efficient double pane your savings is less than \$70/year!)

So you spent \$6,000 on new windows and your projected savings is \$247 per year. That means that it will take you 24 or so years to get a return on your investment. Less time if energy prices go up, of course, but still. 24 years for payback? Are you kidding Ms. Green with that?

So what should you do? By all means, if you hate the way your windows look and they are beyond repair and you have money in the bank and return on investment isn't your first priority, buy new windows. Buy the most energy efficient and attractive windows you can. But if none of those apply, you have several really good options.

First option is to repair your windows so they are fully functional then weatherstrip, caulk, or otherwise seal any leaks in the window's installation. Next step is to install high quality storm windows, either interior or exterior. In Ms. Green's house, which is almost 100 years old and which has beautiful single pane glass six-foot high windows, she has gone with the interior storm option. This option is more expensive but in an older, crooked house like Ms. Green's it was the best way to preserve the integrity of the windows.

If your home is newer (and industry statistics say that most replacement windows are being installed in homes newer than 10 years old, a statistic that tells Ms. Energy that the window replacement industry is doing a fantastic job at selling their product), then you can easily buy standard storm windows at any home improvement superstore. A quick search shows Ms. Green that it's possible to buy this kind of storm for about \$50. If you install them yourself on your 15 theoretical windows you'll have spent \$750 total, but you'll have the same basic energy savings you'd have had should you have replaced the windows entirely, but at a 3-year payback.

Ms. Green is the combined effort of Adrienne and Mark Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy auditing, energy rating, and home weatherization contracting company. They can be reached on the web: www.homeperformancenc.com and by phone: 919.360.1570.

Garden palette changes like the weather

By Ginny Gregory

Living in North Carolina is like consistently waking up in a "transition tunnel". Just when your routine of hot tea and a savory snack is in place, the weather shifts and iced tea is more in order. As you sit watching the nature show happening at your bird feeder, the weather shifts, the daffodils start to emerge, the Prunus mume and the Camellia japonica all start a premature entrance on stage and we are left wondering who changed the channel.

Gardens prepare us for change daily. Left to their own devices, plants have a very natural reaction to their environment. Unlike humans, there is often little resistance. When the ground is too wet, daphnaes simply start a quick death ... branch by sobering branch. When 24° nights follow a 65° day, the camellias freeze, all new blossoms turn brown and the new buds wait for a more comfortable moderate temperature to break bad and bloom again.

As gardeners, we can help this process out by making sure the daphnaes are in locations that are protected from

consistent moisture and camellias are planted so the early winter sun does not wake them up each morning. That's why we are always moving things around in search of the perfect spot and making sure the nutrients are on target for the particular plant in question. We are caretakers by nature, but the truth is nature has its own set of rules we just try to help keep the balance.

Our gardens force us to look at the need for change. Sometimes hard pruning isn't going to keep a favorite plant in that perfect spot. Occasionally, you have to let go of the familiar and try an entirely new plant. Even though you like that Madagascar periwinkle you have always used, a virus that often occurs from replanting this plant is forcing you to think outside of the box. ...tapping you on the shoulder and suggesting you try another approach. Like humans, plants wear out over time.

We have to allow them an honorable exit plan. This is when I encourage you to try a different look. Put on your observation hat and start to notice what catches your eye as you walk your neighborhood. When you find a new choice, see if this plant is in the same growing environment as yours in terms of exposure and scale.



Often the next right plant is just around the corner.

Then start looking for reputable sources.

If the price is too good the plant is usually too pitiful. Local small nurseries are most likely to have solid information, will stand

behind their product and will give you good service choosing which plant (of the 10 in stock) has the best shape and color. To keep stimulated as gardeners, we have to keep expanding our palate so that we keep putting new textures and colors and forms together.

Since winter offers a time for rest, we can start perusing the multitude of catalogues and start dreaming of the new plants soon to be integrated into our

garden. This year, I am totally focused on transplanting shrubs that have outgrown their space to more open areas either in my terraced gardens or up in the cutting gardens. I am constantly mulling over visual perspective and the need to position plants so that they can be enjoyed from multiple directions. As an older gardener, I am not timid to say, prune it back hard, or lose the lower arms or dig it and move it on to another location. It is in the doing that I am becoming a warrior in the garden. ...fearless, knowing that time is a thread that can easily be broken. So I try new plants, rediscover old favorites and let go of those I have struggled with way too long. My eyes see the change, long for old spaces to be filled differently for tomorrow it could begin a week of unseasonably low temps and it all could be lost. I am fiercely soaking up the moment of beauty before me. Change is our partner in crime. With each transition, a new window opens. Move with the flow, nature will lead the way.

Ginny Gregory is a regular contributor to Chatham County Line. She is the owner and creative energy behind Beyond The Pail... Creating Gardens and Beyond www.beyondthepail.net.

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