



fresh picked

Plan now to enjoy nature's finest all season long
{ by Vanessa Geneva Ahern }

One of life's great pleasures is enjoying fresh, ripe berries at breakfast. Or how about impressing dinner guests with a salad medley of tender homegrown greens and cherry tomatoes?

The appeal of fruits and vegetables, picked at their succulent best, is prompting more and more gardeners to try growing their own. Eddie Anderson, horticulturist and president of McDonald Garden Centers, reports that over the past four years vegetable sales have risen steadily. He points to the popularity of organic food and concern for the environment — not to mention a burgeoning appreciation for great-tasting fresh food. >>

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RIPE BOUNTY. By taking stock and planning ahead, you can have fresh vegetables all season long.

Luckily, in Virginia's Tidewater area, which straddles zones 7 and 8, growing your own food is not too challenging. Planting typically starts in mid- to late April, and the growing season can run up to 280 days. "Our long summer heat allows us to have melons, peppers, okra, and fruits like figs and oriental persimmons," says Anderson.

Dig In

The experts at McDonald Garden Centers suggest these tips for hungry gardeners who want to make the most of our area's generous climate:

HAVE A BLUEPRINT

"Think about what you and your family like to eat and what you're planning

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Top Picks

CHERRY TOMATOES

"Cherry tomatoes are great to grow, especially if you have young children – children love them," says Eddie Anderson of McDonald Garden Centers. Growing cherry tomatoes is a fun way to get your children hooked on eating vegetables.

*** Tip:** Try the orange-yellow 'Sun Gold' for a colorful splash in summer salads.

PEPPERS

The sweet All American Winner 'Carmen' will make its market entrance in 2008. 'Big Bertha' is robust and meaty.

*** Tip:** To increase the vitamin content and intensify the flavor of sweet peppers, don't pick them until they are red.

CUCUMBERS

The 'Chef Jeff Bush Champion' variety grows a compact vine while 'Chef Jeff Burpless 26' has a full-size vine and longer fruit.

*** Tip:** To save garden space, grow cucumbers in a wire cage.

FIGS

Figs thrive in Virginia heat. 'Violette de Bordeaux' is well suited for containers. 'Celeste', another compact grower, is the sweet-

est of the varieties available at McDonald Garden Centers.

*** Tip:** 'Strawberry Verde' has a green exterior with a surprising strawberry red interior.

BLUEBERRIES

Planting two varieties (Anderson likes 'Tifblue' and 'Premier') ensures good pollination and fruit set.

*** Tip:** Find a location that will get as much moisture as possible. For best results lower the pH to about 4.5.

STRAWBERRIES

Anderson says he gets a great yield from the June-bearing 'Chef Jeff Chandler' variety.

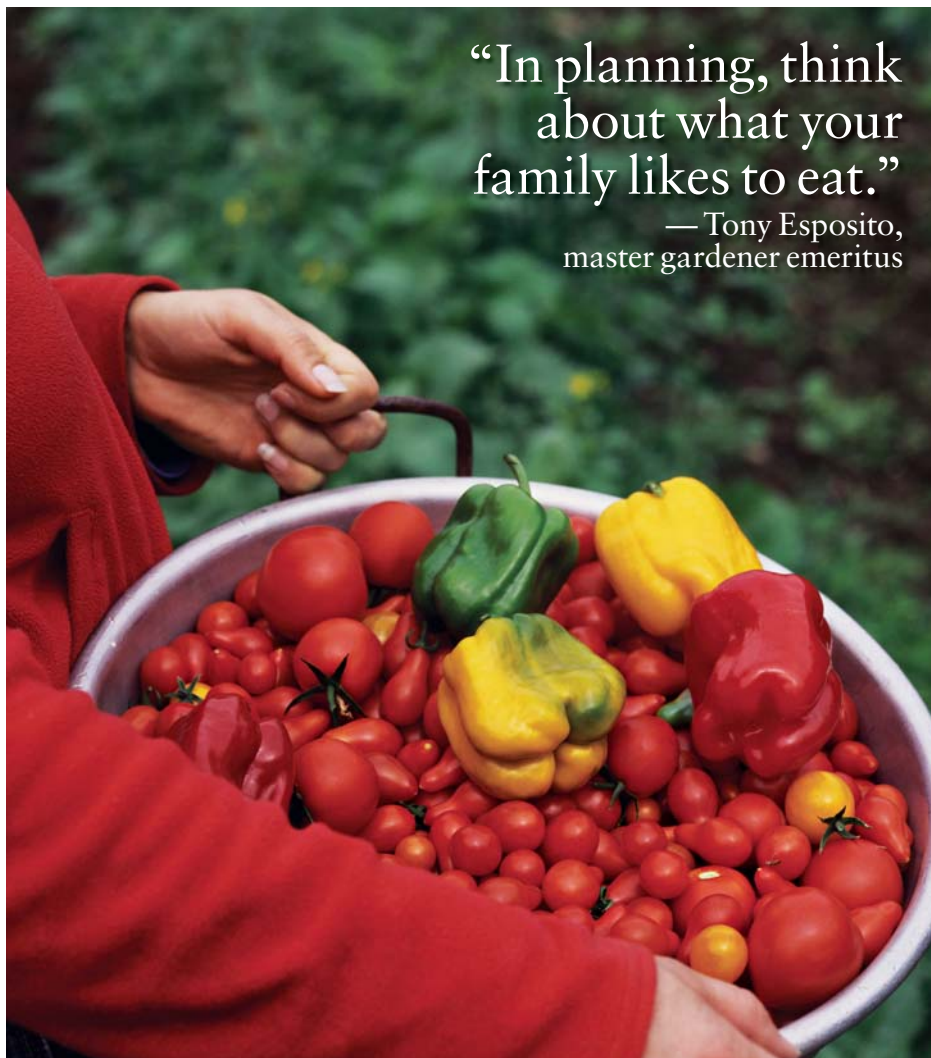
*** Tip:** Use strawberries as a ground cover in a landscape if you don't want to use garden space. Tower and ring systems can be a good option in smaller spaces.

PERSIMMONS

As a boy, Anderson used to climb persimmon trees in the woods and eat the native variety, but now he prefers the Asian varieties.

*** Tip:** Try planting a 'Fuyu' or 'Saijo' to discover the sweet pleasures of persimmons.

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“In planning, think about what your family likes to eat.”

— Tony Esposito,
master gardener emeritus

MAKE ROOM FOR VEGGIES

If you don't have outdoor space or much time to maintain a vegetable garden, consider an EarthBox. “This ‘garden in a box’ grows healthy, bountiful plants while eliminating overwatering and overfertilizing issues,” says Bill Kidd, outdoor plant merchandise manager at McDonald Garden Centers. With the foolproof EarthBox system, you just keep the reservoir filled and it takes care of the rest. The optional staking system is perfect for vegetables like tomatoes and beans that need support. Available at McDonald Garden Centers (\$50–\$70).

to do with the produce,” advises Tony Esposito of Hampton, Va., a master gardener emeritus. “If you plant too many, they may grow faster than you can eat them.”

TEST THE SOIL

For best results it's important to run a pH test on your soil. “Keeping the pH adjusted correctly makes your fertilizer more effective and improves plant performance,” says Anderson. Garden Rewards customers can have this done at the store at no charge. If you want to run frequent tests, a home pH test meter, available at the garden center for \$24.99, is a good investment.



CHOOSE A SUNNY SPOT

Vegetables need a minimum of six hours of sun each day. “Long-term crops like fruit trees, shrubs, and vines should be planted to the north side so everybody gets a share of the sun, creating an ascending order as you look north,” says Anderson.

ADD MULCH

Mulch keeps soil moisture at an even level. The first week of May, when the soil has warmed up, is the right time to cover it with 4 to 6 inches of mulch.

WATER WEEKLY

Vegetable gardens like about an inch of water a week, preferably in the morning, rather than a little water every day. “Once a week, give your garden a deep watering,” says Esposito. “That inch of water seeps down into the ground, and the plants will develop a good strong root system because they have to go deeper to get the moisture.” ♦

Vanessa Geneva Ahern is planting a vegetable garden this spring to feed her addiction to vine-ripened tomatoes.

For more information, go to www.mcdonaldgardencenter.com.