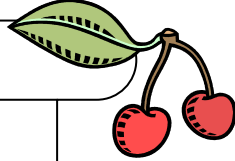


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## **GROWING FRUIT IN THE HOME GARDEN**

Submitted by John Farfaglia

### **Environment , Gardening & Land Use**

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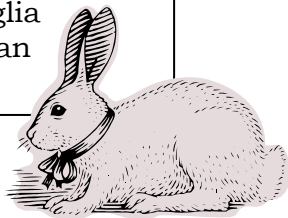
#### **EDITORS**

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The thought of stepping outside the door of one's house and picking a piece of ripe fruit is the dream of many home owners. The option of being able to let the fruit ripen on the tree, bush, or vine, and the convenience of having the fruit close-by certainly seem to be good reasons for home-grown fruit. This is the time of the year when catalogs are arriving, and we begin to think about spring, being around the garden, and getting our hands in the soil again. This article will help you to consider some of the advantages and disadvantages of growing fruit plants. Remember that even if you decide that fruit growing at home is not for you, we have commercial fruit growers in the Hudson Valley who grow quality farm-ripe fruit in abundance. Patronizing our local fruit growers will bring you the taste of home-grown fruit without expending the time and effort needed for home production.

#### **Advantages of growing fruit at home could be outlined as follows:**

1. Fruit can be picked when you desire and at its peak of flavor and ripeness. Sometimes commercial fruit is picked unripe in an effort to increase shelf life, and it needs to be ripened for a while at home. If picked at an immature stage, it never ripens to its full potential flavor.
2. Some home owners may wish to consume varieties of fruit that are not being grown locally, and by growing at home, can choose desired varieties.
3. Some gardeners take much pride in the fruit they grow, and the fruit can become a conversation piece when friends and relatives are invited to share in the production.
4. Fruit is healthy, and sometimes when it's grown at home, the family tends to eat more.
5. Labor is involved in growing fruit, but actual cash spent on the family's fruit could be less, resulting in a savings on the food bill.



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6. Fruit can be worked into the edible landscape and can be decorative, while productive. Less common fruit plants are often more disease and cold resistant, with fruit that is more nutritious and flavorful than common fruit plants.

7. By growing one's own fruit, the owner is in charge of the pest control program, and knows what has or has not been sprayed on the crop.



**Disadvantages to growing fruit at home are summarized here:**

1. Vacation schedules and work schedules could result in the home-grower not being home when the fruit is ripe.

2. Fruit production is often feast or famine. In some years, weather leads to heavy production, and other years may have no production. Also, to extend the season, a number of different varieties that produce at different times should be planted. Sometimes there is not enough room in the garden for this, and production may be much more than one desires.

3. Probably the main drawback to growing fruits is the pest problem including deer, turkeys, raccoons, and others. This is in addition to the host of fungal, insect, and bacterial pests that have the potential of destroying the crop as well as the plant.

4. The fruit plants can be messy if the crop is not harvested and drops to the ground. This can also draw other insects and rodents that consume the fruit and can become a nuisance.

5. Space is needed for production, and this is sometimes a limitation for home gardens.



6. Water requirements for fruit may exceed available water or watering system capacity in times of drought.

7. Overall management time for the fruit can exceed the time a home gardener has to devote to the project.

Home gardeners have been most successful with disease-resistant varieties of plants. Also, the easiest to grow common fruits that require the least care are strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. The main

problem with this group of plants would be weed control in the strawberries. If a well drained, sunny site is chosen, the plants are kept watered, and deer (and birds) are controlled, other problems are few.

Various printed materials about fruit plants are available at your local Cornell Cooperative Extension office. Source: Steven A. McKay Extension Educator, Columbia County, The "News" February 2008

## **SOIL BASICS**

Submitted by John Farfaglia

With gardening, it all starts with the soil. It is your key to success. If you are new to gardening – or even if you are not – here is a checklist of things to keep in mind when starting a garden or taking care of the on-going need to improve your soil.

**Plan ahead.** If you plan to plant a flower or vegetable garden, the time to get started improving your soil is the fall before you plant (if not earlier). It takes time to build healthy soil. But you and your plants will be much more satisfied with the results than if you wait until the last minute, just before you want to plant.

**Check the drainage.** Most plants like soil that is well-drained. So avoid locating gardens and planting beds in places where water pools and stands after heavy rains. Hard layers under the topsoil may be preventing water from draining away. (To find out, try probing the ground with a metal rod or digging into the soil with a shovel). If for other reasons a poorly drained spot seems attractive, you may be able to break up the hard layer so water won't collect, or build raised beds to help keep plant roots out of standing water.

To test drainage, dig a whole about 1 foot deep. Fill with water and allow it to drain completely. Immediately refill the pit and measure the depth of the water with a ruler. 15 minutes later, measure the drop in water in inches, and multiply by 4 to calculate how much water drains in an hour.

Less than 1 inch per hour is poor drainage, indicating the site may stay wet for periods during the year. Plants that don't tolerate poor drainage will suffer. One to six inches of drainage per hour is desirable. Soils that drain faster than 6 inches per hour have excessive drainage, and you should consider choosing plants that tolerate dry conditions and "droughty" soils.

**Observe the existing vegetation.** Does your potential garden spot currently support a healthy lawn, or if it is a neglected site, a robust population of weeds? If the existing vegetation is weak, it may be a sign that you will have to work harder at improving the soil so your plants will thrive.

**Explore the soil.** Take a shovel and dig around your potential garden area and explore the soil. Can you dig down 8 to 12 inches or more without hitting hard layers? Do roots from existing plants penetrate that far? The deeper they go, the better. But it is the top 6 to 8 inches of soil where you need to focus your attention or soil improvement. Look for earthworms and other signs of healthy soil life.



**What color is your soil?** You can tell a lot about soil just by looking at its color:

- **Dark soil:** In general, the darker the soil the more organic matter it contains. Many garden plants perform better in soils that are high in organic matter.
- **Brown-red:** This is usually a sign that the soil has adequate air and good drainage.
- **Blue-green or gray:** This is usually a sign that the soil is continuously wet or saturated, a condition that is not good for most garden plants.
- **Yellow:** This is usually a sign that the soil is imperfectly drained.
- **Mottling or streaking:** This is usually a sign of seasonal or periodic drainage problems.

**What is your soil's texture?** At one extreme, soils can be like porous beach sand. At the other end of the texture

spectrum, they can be like sticky modeling clay. Neither extreme is ideal but you need to know your soil's texture to know the best ways of helping your plants thrive. Here is a simple way to determine your soil's texture.

**Test the soil.** Contact John at Cornell Cooperative Extension, Niagara County phone 716-433-8839 x 226 for information about soil testing. Basic soil tests can tell you whether or not you will need to apply lime or sulfur to adjust the acidity of your soil, and let you know whether your soil is high or low in the essential nutrients plants need most. If you plan to grow edible plants in an urban area (or near a building where lead-based paint chips have contaminated soil), it is important to test for contaminants.

**Other site considerations.** Before you settle on a garden spot, consider other aspects of your site: Avoid steep slopes unless you will be installing terracing. (Otherwise, soil not protected by mulch or vegetation can wash away.) Keep in mind that most vegetables and many flowers need 6 or more hours of direct sun each day. Also avoid areas where there are tree roots, septic systems or underground utilities. If you are planting trees, make sure that overhead wires won't be a problem.

**Mark the boundaries.** Once you have settled on a site, mark the boundaries to distinguish your garden from lawn. Stakes and string work well for straight edges. Use a hose or heavy rope for curved beds. Or you can mark the edges with a little lime, flour, or special landscape spray paint. It is a good idea to live with just the marked off beds for a few days or weeks, if you have time. As you navigate through your yard, you may discover that their boundaries need adjusting. Before you start preparing the soil, make sure you haven't committed yourself to too big an area. It is better to start small and focus your efforts, then expand your garden as you gain experience.

**Kill existing vegetation.** If you are growing vegetables or flowers, one of the first things you need to do is kill the

existing lawn or other vegetation that would otherwise compete with your plants. You have several options. You can:

- Cover the area with black plastic for a month or more, then work the dead vegetation into the soil with a tiller or hand tools. (This works faster during summer.)
- Cover the area with newspaper (five sheets or more thick) or cardboard. Cover this with a thick layer of straw, grass clippings, or other organic material. This will smother the sod in a month or more, then you can work in the dead vegetation, newspaper and/or cardboard and organic mulch with a tiller or hand tools. (This works faster during summer.)
- Use a nonselective herbicide. In a few weeks, after the vegetation is completely dead, you can work it into the soil.
- For small areas, turn over sod with a shovel. Then kill weeds and grass with a hoe as they regrow. Or for larger areas, use a tiller to work in sod and regrowth as it occurs until the vegetation is suppressed. Careful: Over-tilling can hurt soil.
- Remove grass sod with a flat spade, taking the top several inches of soil with it. Replace with purchased topsoil and other organic materials. (Using purchased topsoil may only be practical for small areas.) You can compost the sod and add it back to the soil later.

**Add organic matter.** Whether you are trying to get a heavy clay soil to drain better, or light sandy soil to retain water and nutrients, one of the surest ways of improving your soil is to add organic matter. Spread 2 to 4 inches of compost or well-rotted manure, for example, and work it into the soil after you kill the vegetation. Make additional applications as often as you can. Grass clippings, leaves, organic mulches, peat moss, and topsoil are other good sources of organic matter. (Adding sand to clay soil will not make it drain better. When you mix sand and clay with water and then allow the mix to dry, the result closely resembles concrete.)

**Add other materials.** While you are adding organic matter to your soil, mix in any fertilizer, lime or sulfur that you need. Your soil test should offer

recommendations for how much to apply. Be careful not to over-fertilize. More is not always better.

**Avoid compaction.** You have worked hard to make your soil nice and fluffy and hospitable to plants. Don't ruin it by compacting it. When it is wet, avoid walking on the soil or working it with hand tools or tillers. Create permanent paths separating wide (3 to 4 feet) planting beds, and only walk in the paths. If you make wider beds, place stepping stones strategically to help you reach areas for weeding or maintenance without walking on the soil.

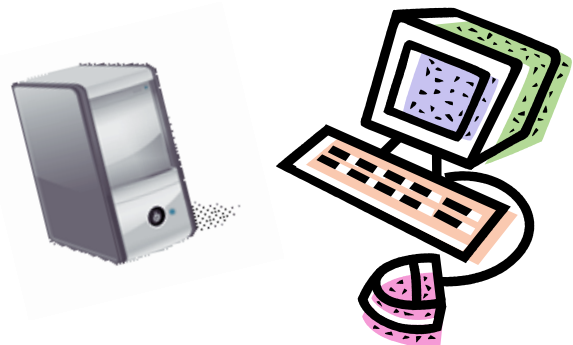
**Continue adding organic matter.** Every summer, microbes in the soil literally digest and burn up some of the organic matter in the soil. You need to keep adding more to keep improving your soil. In vegetable gardens, consider planting cover crops such as buckwheat, annual ryegrass, clover or winter rye. You grow these crops to protect the bare soil after you harvest vegetables, then till them in as another source of organic matter.

Source: © Copyright, Department of Horticulture, Cornell University

## ***ELECTRONIC WASTE***

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

**Electronic waste or "E" waste** is the fastest growing part of the waste stream. A 20-minute online film on the subject, entitled "The Story of Stuff" can be viewed at [www.storyofstuff.com](http://www.storyofstuff.com). The short film outlines the effects of our consumer culture and details where our stuff comes from and where it goes once we toss it. For local electronic recyclers in your area visit <http://earth911.org/>. Source: Rural Future, January/February 2008



## **EAT A LOW-FAT VEGETARIAN DIET**

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

*“If everyone in New York State followed a low-fat vegetarian diet, the state could directly support almost 50 percent more people, or about 32 percent of its population, agriculturally.”* This is a quote from a new study, entitled **Diet for a Healthy Planet Includes Dairy and a Little Meat**, by Jennifer Wilkins, senior extension associate in nutritional sciences at Cornell University. Download the study at <http://www.human.cornell.edu/che/Outreach/upload/Diet.pdf>. Source: Rural Future, January/February 2008

## **WHY NOT NEW YORK CURRANTS?**

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

**Black currants are a forgotten fruit** in most American diets, but extremely popular in Europe. The fruit is packed with antioxidants, which have been shown to have significant health benefits. Research has shown that the black currant has a much higher source of antioxidants than the blueberry and has three times the amount of Vitamin C found in oranges. Black currants also contain significant amounts of Vitamin B6, Vitamin E, potassium, copper and soluble fiber. They are rich in phytochemicals called *anthocyanins* which are known for their outstanding anti-inflammatory benefits. And if one person has his way, the black currant industry is making a comeback in New York State. Greg Quinn, a culinary and horticulture expert, founded The Currant Company, located in Clinton in the Hudson Valley. He hopes the black currant will give New York the opportunity to market an agricultural crop as uniquely its own; like, Idaho potatoes, Iowa pork, Florida oranges, and Washington apples. *Why not New York Currants?* Mr. Quinn’s management company will assist landowners who want to have their land

cultivated and planted with currants. He has worked with NY lawmakers, scientists from Cornell University, and the US Department of Agriculture on the black currant comeback. In 2003, legislation was signed into law allowing all varieties of currants to be grown in New York State. Learn more at [www.currantc.com](http://www.currantc.com). Source: Rural Future, January/February 2008

## **TAX WORKOFF PROGRAM**

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

The Town of Greenburgh in Westchester County is pushing for a pilot program to allow seniors to work part-time, for \$7 an hour, to help pay off some of their property taxes. The vision for the program is retired doctors mentoring school children, retired accountants helping with the town’s finances, retired lawyers offering their services for a discount – as well as such less-skilled jobs as, research, data entry, receptionists, and much more. The Town of Greenburgh has the nation’s third-highest homeowner property taxes. Similar programs have succeeded in Colorado, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. Boulder County, Colorado pioneered the tax workoff program in 1986 for residents over 60. Today, the program receives about 250 applicants for fewer than 100 openings. The work done by seniors includes landscaping, gathering climate data, clipping newspapers, and staffing the courthouse information booth. Many seniors even stay in the program as volunteers after paying off their taxes. Source: Rural Future, January/February 2008



## **SPICING UP SURGERY**

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

The hot sauce that numbs your tongue may ease the pain of surgery...*Associated Press* reports that doctors are experimenting with dripping purified forms of capsaicin – the chemical that makes hot sauce hot – onto exposed nerves during certain medical procedures like knee replacements, hoping the nerves will stay numbed for weeks to reduce pain during recovery...Hot peppers have been a part of traditional medicine for centuries...Doctors are also testing a more potent cousin of capsaicin to ease the suffering of cancer patients.

## **TIME FOR A WALK**

Submitted by Paul E. Lehman

A common excuse for not exercising continues to be lack of time...But previous Stamford University research still stands, says Walking Connections Web site founder, Jo Ann Taylor: people who don't have a half hour to walk can successfully increase their fitness with shorter sessions – like three 10-minute walks during the day...To work exercise into your busy schedule, take a “walking break” instead of a coffee break, park at the far edges of store parking lots, and walk while waiting for the kids in sports and music practice.