
DOWN ON THE URBAN FARM

BY GREG PETERSON

There is something to eat in my yard every day, 365 days a year. Last Thanksgiving it was a wonderful salad that included: six different greens such as Nasturtium leaves and sorrel (a surprise find growing in the back 'wild' area); ruby red pomegranate seeds; an incredible citrus called limequat that was sliced up skin and all for a tangy/sweet sensation; and a little bit of the herbs tarragon and fennel, along with a smidge of that pretty little three leaf clover you see growing in some yards called sour grass. The flavors were so diverse and striking that I chose not to add any dressing to the salad at all (much to my mom's chagrin, as she loves having many dressing choices to embellish her salads).

I have spent a large part of the past 16 years integrating edible plants into my landscape, from the Thanksgiving salad and my farm soup, to the occasional snack as I work through my weekly urban farmer tasks. All the hard work and experimentation has netted an incredible, edible yard, and a hard-knocks education about how and what grows best in the desert.

When I was in the eighth grade my family moved into a home with a very large yard where the back 1/3-acre became our garden. We planted, the seeds grew and a spark ignited inside of me. I decided to become a farmer. Over time, my dream became farming 200 acres out there somewhere. Then a few years ago, I went back to school for my bachelors degree and I was required to write a vision for my life. In that vision, farmer was still there, but it showed up with a twist. I realized that my gardening hobby of 10+ years was in reality urban farming and an incredible canvas on which to paint my dream. I didn't need the 200 acres. The Urban Farm was

born, and I was a farmer.

One outlet for my farming passion has been to re-landscape my entire yard with the notion that everything I grow is either edible, or supports the plants that are edible.

Over the past 16 years I have planted: trees that produce edible fruits, nuts and beans such as mesquite; perennial herbs including basil and oregano that I use a hedge trimmer on periodically; the standard annual vegetables—broccoli, snow peas, and cucumbers to name just a few. Because of our name, visitors to the Urban Farm have the expectation they will see long rows of corn and beans, in other words, a full working farm. To the contrary, much of what we have accomplished lives in standard garden beds. If people visiting did not know any differently, they would just see a nicely landscaped yard.

Magic happens when I stand back and watch the natural processes that exist in my yard. A couple of springs ago I was fighting a basil plant—it wanted to bloom, I wanted the basil leaves—as if I KNEW what was best for it. After a long battle, which I finally learned that I could not

win, I gave up and let the basil bloom, and boy did it bloom. What happened next was one of those secrets that nature only whispers if you stand back and watch. The bees arrived by the hundreds, and since then pollination has not been a problem on the Urban Farm.

I have also begun exploring the indigenous foods that populate our natural landscape. For many years I have collected and processed prickly pears into juice, syrup, and jelly, feeding the leftover pulp to the chickens who greedily consume it. Then a while back, I ventured to a friend's house



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outside Tucson and she fed me saguaro fruit, palo verde beans (which taste very much like edamame), roasted ironwood beans, and mesquite flour cookies, and I was hooked. Once again, through slowing down and observing what nature had to offer, my horizon was expanded to a whole new variety of edibles to grow and harvest.

My job these days, besides being a full time ASU student, seems to be helping others transform their outdoor living spaces into edible wonderlands. Offering a plethora of Urban Farming classes is yet another way for me to express my passion. Topics such as vermiculture (cultivating worms for their manure), desert gardening, composting, edible landscaping, fruit trees, and the always popular “Keeping Chickens in Your Yard” have begun to reconnect Phoenix residents to the roots of where our food comes from. I enjoy creating the possibility for urban farms to pop up elsewhere in the Valley.

Farming the city spaces around us presents a whole new paradigm for growing our own food and reigniting our connection to nature. The tools are here, and the knowledge is available. You can kindle your desire by getting your hands dirty, taking a chance and spreading some seeds. The fruits of your labor are much tastier than what you’ll find in the grocery store and come along with the satisfaction that YOU grew them. Many people tell me of their “black” thumbs as

they admire what I grow on the Urban Farm. I reflect back to them the years of experimenting I have done, noting ALL the plants that did not make under my care, and that this is how I became an urban farmer.



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Source: Courtesy of Nestor Chavira