

HOMEGARDEN

Designing, Installing Custom Vegetable Gardens

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

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NEWPORT NEWS, Va. — Shane Emmett believes vegetable gardens should be as attractive and easy as they are nutritional and healthy, and he's launched a venture to prove his case.

He and his business partner and childhood friend, Ivan Fehrenbach, started the United States of Food, which custom builds and installs raised vegetable gardens sized and suited for homes and businesses, especially restaurants.

"I initially conjured the concept when I was living in California years ago and I read the 'Omnivore's Dilemma' while simultaneously killing basil plants in my yard," says Shane, 32, now a lawyer living in Richmond, Va.

"Michael Pollan suggests growing your own food to get to truly understand food policy. I tried and it took me weeks to realize that I was planting the poor herbs in rocks. I thought there must be a way to help people grow their own food.

"We are here to make the experience easier to the gardening neophyte. Also, the gardens just look great in a yard — they are works of art."

United States of Food operates from Ivan's 20-acre property just outside Williamsburg, Va. Ivan, 32, is a contractor who built his home while living in a tent for a year. During that time, Ivan mostly ate what he grew in a large garden there. Now, the land supports a small composting operation, poultry, vegetables, specialty plants, turkeys, peacocks and goats. They mix their soil blend, and build the garden frames in a carpentry shop. Saturdays, they set up shop at the Williamsburg Farmers Market.

In Williamsburg to install a culinary garden at Berret's Seafood Restaurant, Shane shows visitors how the gardens are designed to fit individual needs and how they enhance the landscape for visitors walking by. Each plant of



SANGJIB MIN/NEWPORT NEWS DAILY PRESS/MCT
Quinn Emmett, from left, Joshua Bruns and Kenra Charles install a garden at a restaurant in Williamsburg, Va. The garden was installed by United States of Food which sets up ready-made gardens.

cedar is individually cut, trimmed with a router and treated with tung oil. Thin copper wire that glistens like art in the summer sun is used for trellising. The raised beds are filled with a mixture of compost, leaf mulch and vermiculite. Drip hoses operated with timers ensure watering is easy; a deer netting system is available.

"It looks almost like a piece of lawn furniture when it's complete," says Shane. "We've been amazed and pleased with how well everything grows in these gardens."

Shane and Ivan plant the gardens with heirloom varieties raised by seeds they purchase from organic sources such as Southern Exposure Seed Exchange and A Thyme to Plant, both in the Richmond area. They also like Johnny's Selected Seeds. When it comes to tomatoes, they favor oldies like Matt's Wild Cherry, Purple Cherokee, Yellow Pear and Green Zebra.

With proper care, succession planting and regular harvesting, the gardens pay for themselves in less than two years, says Shane. The gardens with soil and plants start at \$88 and go up to \$785 for a backyard combination garden; some kits are shippable. They will seasonally replant your garden for a fee based on size and number of plants needed.

The company also custom builds trellises, arbors and chicken coops — and will provide the chickens with instructions on how to care for them.

Everything is outlined — and more coming, including the "real food forum" — on its Web site at www.unitedstatesoffood.com.

"There is no better way to appreciate food systems and real food than growing your own, even if it's just a handful of plants," says Shane.

"We want to help people with healthy living and rediscover a very American value: local sustainability and understand where

food comes from."

GROWING VEGETABLES

Create a good soil mix. Thoroughly work aged organic matter such as shredded leaves and mulch into existing soil or topsoil you have brought in.

Think raised gardens. Plantings created above ground drain better, are easier to weed and harvest and allow you to improve the soil without a lot of tilling and digging.

Plant properly. Space vegetable plants so they get good air and light circulation for even development and fewer disease and pest problems.

Use compact varieties for small spaces and containers. Plan your crops. Succession planting ensures crops throughout the season instead of everything coming in at once.

For instance, plant tomatoes now through July 1 for later harvests; learn how at www.dailypress.com/diggingblog.



SANGJIB MIN/NEWPORT NEWS DAILY PRESS/MCT
Quinn Emmett helps install a garden at a restaurant in Williamsburg, Va. The garden was installed by United States of Food which sets up ready-made gardens.

Water wisely. Lay soaker/dripper hoses along rows of vegetable plants for deep watering in root zones. Cover hoses with mulch and regulate with a timer. Avoid using overhead sprinklers which waste water to evaporation and wind and keep foliage wet, making it susceptible to fungal diseases.

Harvest regularly. Herbs in particular do best when you prune and use them often. Check squash and cucumbers often

because they grow quickly and get too big if left on the vine.

RESOURCES

- United States of Food at www.unitedstatesoffood.com or 804-925-8763.
- Southern Exposure Seed Exchange at www.southernexposure.com/index.html
- Johnny's Selected Seeds at www.johnnyseeds.com
- A Thyme to Plant at www.athymetoplant.com

Gardening In PJs's? OK, I'm Guilty

BY MARIANA GREENE

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How many of you have gardened in your PJs's?

I'm guilty, for one. You go out the front door to pick up the newspaper, you go out the back door with the dog and, before you know it, you're deadheading roses and watering dry pots — in your nightie.

Anecdotal evidence indicates this is a female phenomenon. I've never heard a man mention such an unseemly habit. My husband pokes his head out the front door and looks up and down the block several times. If the coast is clear, he leaps for the newspapers on the lawn and dashes back into the house, audibly breathing a sigh of relief he wasn't caught in his drawers.

Somehow, gardening in your pajamas in your own backyard doesn't seem as extreme as throwing a jacket over them and heading to the farmers market — in Manhattan on a Saturday morning — to join the throngs buying organic produce. But that's what former House & Garden editor Dominique Browning confesses to us in her new memoir, "Slow Love: How I Lost My Job, Put on My Pajamas & Found Happiness" (Atlas, \$23).

Browning spent a stint in Texas working at Texas Monthly before leaving for the high-stakes publishing world of New York. Until November 2007 she was editor-in-chief of Conde Nast's House & Garden; when it was shut down without warning, she and her staff were given less than a week to vacate their offices.

"Slow Love," published in May, is her recounting of a divorced, empty-nester career woman's means of dealing with the sudden loss of her identity, not to mention her income, as a

respected mover and shaker in the publishing world. Going to the farmers market in her pajamas is but one reaction to her life crisis.

Browning is known in gardening circles for her passion for gardening. This is not the first book she has written that describes how digging in the dirt and tending flowers are her salvation. That's what attracts me to her writing.

Faced with my only child's leaving home for college in 2004, I began to garden furiously. I've always gardened, but never with the ferocity I practice now.

The author is painfully candid about the despair she suffers in her losses and loneliness. On the one hand, I admire her frankness in putting all her less-than-admirable antics on these pages for all to read. On the other, I am horrified.

The pajama sortie gets worse: "I decide to venture further and stock up on items like milk and pasta. But within a couple of blocks, I develop drawing problems. (Browning has revealed a few pages earlier that she wears only Brooks Brothers men's pajamas, and why.) I should have tied a double knot. My pants are sliding down. Breathless, I pause in a doorway to address the dishevelment, and I realize that on top of it all I neglected to brush my hair. I worry for a moment that I might have gone too far with the pajamas thing."

Yeah. Maybe. However, the bottom line is that Browning is a sister in gardenhood. She gets it. She understands me — us — when my husband doesn't.

"People who garden are their own peculiar tribe, compelled to get their hands into the earth," she writes. "Gardeners have to dig, and leave their trace on a patch of earth."

Crazy Tall: Flowers That Reach The Stars

BY WILLIAM HAGEMAN

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For the longest time, tall plants have been relegated to the back of the garden, up against a fence or off to a corner, shunted aside like that 6-foot seventh-grader who was always in the last row for class photos.

But a flower bed of 4-, 5- or 6-foot plants can be functional and rewarding — and quite an attention-getter as well.

"One of my friends calls them 55-mile-an-hour plants," says Justin W. Hancock, a Better Homes and Gardens garden editor since 2003 and now the senior garden editor for the magazine's Web site (bhg.com). "They catch your attention even when you're flying down the highway at 55 miles an hour."

Hancock says that some gardeners can be intimidated by tall plants, assuming there's extra work involved because they all need to be staked. That may be true for some varieties, such as delphiniums, but not others, such as sunflowers and cannas.

"Another thing I like about them is privacy," Hancock says. "They're a great way to screen views, especially if you live in some of these suburban areas where your neighbors' deck is 10 feet from yours. You don't have room for a hedge. You don't want to put in a fence. But some of these taller perennials will give you nice coverage over the summer season and into the fall."

Even if a gardener does think big, finding the right tall plants can be a challenge. "I think (interest) is diminishing," Hancock says. "It's so much

easier to ship compact plants. Put them on the truck, they're damaged less. So more and more plant breeders are trying to get their plants smaller and smaller."

Still, there are enough large flowers available to put on a flashy show (and many even grow better from seed, making them a great value too). Here are a few:

Boltonia: This underused North American native, a member of the aster family, looks a lot like an aster, with white or pink flowers. It can grow, shrublike, to 6 feet. "It puts on a huge show in the late summer, fall," Hancock says. "It's the aster on steroids." Full sun.

Butterfly bush: A butterfly bush can grow to 5 or 6 feet — 7 in a good season. They attract butterflies and other insects as well as hummingbirds, drawn to their pink, white, purple or blue flowers. Full sun.

Canna: Big leaves and boldly colored flowers (red, orange, yellow or pink) add drama to a garden. "It's not hard to get them to grow to 5, 6, 7 or 8 feet," Hancock says. "The tallest one is C. Musafolia," and that can get to 12 feet in a season if it's happy, in a warm, moist spot. "These are tropical plants, so gardeners here will have to dig and store the rhizomes in a cool, dry place, or simply treat them like annuals. Full sun."

Cleome: Also known as spider flowers, these annuals grow up to 6 feet tall and have distinctive pink, white or purple flowers. They're easy to grow from seed. "They look so much like fireworks to me," Hancock says. "Why wouldn't you want to

grow it? They're wonderful in attracting hummingbird moths. And they give off a really nice fragrance at night." Full sun.

Cosmos: This delicate-looking flower with its fern-like leaves is tough as nails and easy to grow from seed. Their lacy look makes them great filler plants too. Cosmos need full sun, but will thrive in ordinary soil. Butterflies and bees love them. Sensation is just one of the taller varieties, topping out at 4 feet.

Delphinium: A summer garden staple, they grow to 6 feet and have beautiful blooms that attract butterflies. Hancock calls them "probably the most majestic, eye-catching of the big perennials." He also says they're one of the fussiest. "Delphiniums like really rich soil to produce those good-size blooms, but the plants themselves are often short-lived." Full sun to partial shade.

Hollyhock: Tall, colorful and old-fashioned, they need sun and moisture and will grow to 6 feet or more. Many varieties die off after two years, "but happily they often self-seed, so you plant the seeds once and let the seeds on the plants drop, and you'll never have to plant them again. You see old farmsteads that have been abandoned for 20 years that still have stands of hollyhocks."

Joe-Pye weed: Another native perennial, it does well (7 feet) in moist soil and has a flat top clustered with flowers. "It's an A-plus plant for attracting butterflies," says Hancock. Full sun but can tolerate some light shade.

Sunflower: If you want them really tall, buy one of the older varieties. "Breeders have really been working on compact varieties with all of those colors," Hancock says. "Some of the newer ones have great branching, so you can get a dozen flowers per plant instead of just the one big one on top." Still, what's more impressive than a 10- or 15-foot-tall plant with a basketball-size flower on top? Some of the taller varieties: American Giant Hybrid, Mammoth and Skyscraper. Full sun.

Zinnia: Keeping with recent trends, these popular annuals have been downsized in a search for compact, more disease-resistant varieties. But the 4-footers still have a lot to offer: They're easy to grow from seed, are colorful and keep producing till frost. Taller varieties include State Fair, California Giant, My Lucky Ladies and Big Red.

GROWING AND LEARNING

Many of these flowers are sold at garden centers and nurseries as seedlings and seeds. Web sites to visit include Burpee (burpee.com), Ferry-Morse Seed Co. (ferrymorse.com), Park Seed (parkseed.com), White Flower Farm (whiteflowerfarm.com) and Hirt's Gardens (hirts.com). These retail sites offer growing tips too.

For additional gardening information, visit the Web sites of the National Gardening Association (garden.org), the University of Illinois Extension (urbanext.illinois.edu/hort) and The Gardener's Network (gardenersnet.com).

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