

HOMEGARDEN

Eco-Friendly Practices Good For Yard, Soul

BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING
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DETROIT — Start talking about a green lawn and most people think you're talking about the color of the grass.

But Lillian Dean of Huntington Woods, Mich., is not most people.

When Dean talks about a green lawn and garden, she's not just talking about esthetics. She's talking about an environmentally friendly space where grass, flowers, trees and vegetables grow in healthy soil that doesn't harm the Earth.

"Step-by-step, the idea that environmental responsibility rests with every person is being infused in our society," says Dean, coordinator of Healthy Lawns and Gardens for the Southeastern Oakland County (Mich.) Water Authority.

"People are looking for things they can do, both as families and individuals. I'm seeing it across the spectrum of ages."

As spring yard clean-ups and early garden work begin, local gardeners and landscape enthusiasts are grappling with the notion of green gardening, perhaps the biggest gardening trend of the past decade and the most challenging. How do you get your flowers and yard to look good without the aid of pesticides and other harsh chemicals?

It takes lots of dedication and education.

"It's important because when pesticides and harmful chemicals get into our air and water, it affects our health and quality of life," says Dean, 63. "The truth is that pesticides kill pests and they have different degrees of toxicity to humans, to birds, to pollinators, bees and butterflies, to aquatic life and other animals."

"Some people are very, very sensitive to even small levels of pesticides in the air or soil," she says. "Others can tolerate a bit more."

It's a message Dean has been spreading for more than a decade. But in recent years, there's been evidence that Michigan gardeners are not only hearing the message of experts like Dean, but heeding it.

Attendance at workshops Dean organizes is rising. A recent two-hour workshop drew more than 100 people to the Oak Park (Mich.) Community Center. "It used to be you had to push your way in. Now people are really open to hearing about it," she says.

Retailers, manufacturers and lawn service companies are also responding to consumer demands for environmentally



Lillian Dean, 63, spreads organic mulch in the flower garden that adds organic matter to the soil for nutrients and to keep in water at her home in Huntington Woods, Michigan, Saturday, April 10, 2010. Dean coordinates healthy lawn and garden education for the Southeastern Oakland County Water Authority, which promotes environment-friendly gardening.

healthy products and services. "One of the simplest, smartest things you can do when applying fertilizer is get any rogue particles off the sidewalk, driveway and street and back on the lawn. Fertilizer granules on these surfaces can easily get washed into the storm drain and can end up polluting rivers and lakes."

"On the other hand," he says, "a dense lawn, as a result of proper mowing, fertilization and irrigation, will effectively limit sediment movement in urban landscapes."

People striving for healthy lawns without pesticides and other chemicals need patience, Calhoun says. "Unfortunately, dramatic results don't occur overnight. We know that proper lawn care practices will reduce broadleaf weed populations by 60 percent to 75 percent over four to six years. Most folks are not patient enough to wait for these results. It does work, but it takes time."

What matters most is using the proper product at the proper time at the proper rate, no mat-

ter what it is," Calhoun says.

There are three keys to environmentally friendly lawns and gardens, Dean and others say. Mow so the grass is at least 3 inches high and leave the clippings where they fall; use fertilizer that's free of pesticides and contains slow-release nitrogen and low or no phosphorus, and water your garden appropriately in the early morning hours, with small amounts of water, several times a week.

Michigan State University Extension turf specialist Ron Calhoun says that people striving for green yards need accurate information. He says using synthetic fertilizers in a yard instead of an organic variety doesn't automatically spell doom for the waterways.

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For Lumley, gardening in an eco-friendly way is not just good for the environment, it's soothing to her soul.

"I come home from work, have a beverage and just sit in the yard and unwind as I listen to the birds," Lumley says. "To me that's very healing to the spirit."

In Royal Oak, Mich., Barbara Johnson is also a green gardening fan; some might even call the 78-year-old a pioneer in the field.

Johnson was first introduced to healthy gardening by her mother. Now her yard includes composting bins, several native plants, two rain gardens and an assortment of roses and shrubs. And if someone pulls up beside you to tell you you're cutting your lawn too short, it just might be Johnson, a retired elementary school teacher who readily admits she'll stop and teach a mini-lesson to folks she sees abusing their lawns.

"I don't buy fertilizer," she says. "My plants make their own food. And I don't get weeds or unwelcome insects."

LAWN AND GARDEN ADVICE

Mow high—grass should be 3 inches in height. Tall grass encourages deep roots and discourages crabgrass and other weeds.

Let grass clippings stay where they fall. They contain valuable nutrients and help shade the soil, reducing moisture loss.

Purchase fertilizer with slow-release nitrogen and low or no phosphorus and no pesticides. Look for brands that have a bright green "Earth-friendly" sticker on them.

Follow product instructions, being careful to apply only the amount needed for the space.

Sweep fertilizer from the pavement onto the lawn or garden.

Learn about composting. And use compost as fertilizer; it's natural, returns nutrients to the land and holds moisture.

Aerate at least once a year to add oxygen to the lawn.

For advance help, send samples of soil to your county's Michigan State University Extension office. To find the Extension office closest to you, visit www.msue.msu.edu or call toll-free 1-888-678-3464. A soil test will help determine best nutrients needed for your soil. There is a fee of \$10 to \$20.

Get green garden help
For a list of Earth-friendly fertilizers and products, lawn care services, retailers and tips, visit www.healthylandscapes.com.

Easy-Does-It: Growing Herbs In The Window

BY JUDY HEVRDEIS
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Window boxes and containers, overflowing with lush plantings, can do more than add a "wow factor" to your home, patio, deck or balcony.

Filled with herbs, those containers can be welcome partners in the kitchen as well as hardworking members of your gardening team.

The volatile oils in herbs that flavor teas, accent salads and kick up the character of our culinary concoctions also play a role in the health of a garden.

"I would plant herbs in my garden if I weren't even cooking with them because they attract beneficial insects that control all the pest insects," says Rosalind Creasy, the Los Altos, Calif., author of numerous garden and food books. "Almost all the beneficial insects at some point in their reproductive lives need pollen and nectar, and they need it from small flowers — not from roses and dahlias and all that."

"Both cooks and gardeners benefit from an herb's aromas because you don't need to use environmentally disruptive chemicals to protect them," writes Jeff Cox in "The Cook's Herb Garden" (DK Publishing, \$18). Cox, Horticulture magazine contributing editor, co-wrote the book with one-stop guide to growing culinary herbs, packed with photos, tips on propagation, storage, weed control and pests, as well as recipes, harvesting tips and more.

Here are tips from Cox and Creasy for anybody filling window boxes or patio pots with herbs.

Grouping: Combine plants that need the same amount of water and fertilizer, Creasy says. Plant drought-tolerant Mediterranean herbs such as oregano, rosemary, thyme and marjoram in one container, and herbs that need more water and fertilizer (say, parsley, basil, cilantro, chervil) in another.

Size things up: "Genovese basil can grow to 2 1/2 feet tall. You put that in a window box, it's not going to look very good," Cox says. "If you're going to put herbs that tend to grow tall in a window box, keep pinching them back."

Shopping savvy: Buy healthy plants growing in good-size pots, Cox says; avoid the leggy ones. Too much top and too little pot means the herb has been watered with liquid fertilizer, he says. "So (it) hasn't needed to grow a lot of root system and put its energy into growing a large top." Once the plant is placed in soil, it won't have the root strength to sustain itself.

Container choices: Use containers that have good drainage (holes on the bottom are a must, for starters). Cox puts a plastic tray in the bottom of a window box with drainage holes, then layers in some stone or gravel.

Soil matters: Choose a good-quality, fast-draining soil, Creasy advises.

It needs to be lightweight in a window box, but that's also practical for containers you'll be moving around a patio. She recommends that the soil have a water-holding medium.

Room to grow: Don't cram herbs in too tightly, Cox says.

Sun and nutrients: Most herbs require full sun, although several (mints, for example) can handle some shade. Pay attention to their growing needs, especially if they will be in one place (like a window box) for the entire season.

Creasy recommends using a good-quality, organic slow-release fertilizer. Because the soil in containers dries out quickly, plants may need daily watering, especially when it's hot outside.

Snip away: One of the biggest benefits of growing herbs is that they love to be used — so don't be afraid to snip them. Herbs in containers especially benefit from constant harvesting, Cox writes, which also keeps plants under control in their restricted space.

Turning Scraps Into Garden Compost

BY JOAN OBERA
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FRESNO, Calif. — It's about 4:30 p.m., and the staff at Irene's Cafe in Fresno, Calif., knows to expect a food pickup. But this isn't a typical order. Instead, it's a bucket filled with food waste — French fries, lemon slices, pickles and pasta covered in sauce.

Grant McDougald sets the bucket on a trailer attached to his bicycle. Then it's off to Starbucks to pick up coffee grounds. A stop at Fremont's Italian Delicatessen yields scraps such as tomato, lettuce and parsley. And a visit to Panaderia Natalie nets a bucket full of eggshells.

The final stop: The community garden in the city's Tower District. Here, McDougald and other members of Local Motion Fresno will compost food waste into fertilizer for the garden's fruits and vegetables.

"We're all kind of food nuts," says McDougald, who likes Local Motion's "idea of fresher food."

That's a typical day for Local Motion, a young organization that encourages more sustainable lifestyles. Made up mostly of Fresno City College students, Local Motion has a number of projects revolving around food. It composts food scraps from businesses in the Tower District and Downtown Fresno. It grows food in community gardens. It has plans to build a pond to raise fish for food.

But it's not just about food. The organization uses bicycles because it cares about a "post-petroleum economy," says Local Motion founder Ashley Boujikian. "We want everything we're doing to be human powered, as in bicycles or walking."

What does Local Motion's version of sustainable food look like? A visit to the Pamela Kincaid Neighborhood Center reveals a glimpse.

Piles of mulch sit in neighboring empty lots. In the enclosed yard, bins full of worms digest food scraps into compost. More worms live in trenches surround-



Matt Bedrosian carries a bucket of food scraps out of Irene's Cafe in Fresno, California, on April 26, 2010. Bedrosian is part of Local Motion Fresno, a group of people that collects food scraps for composting.

ing planted beds; hungry chickens roam the yard, scratching the earth to get to the worms.

There are beehives for honey, and fruit trees with nectarines, peaches, pomegranates and figs. Plants such as tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, kale, spinach and broccoli are in the garden.

"We have a salad or some type of cooked greens every single day," Boujikian says.

Everything is grown organically. Local Motion only uses worm castings and a compost tea to feed its crops, she says.

Launching such a garden requires a lot of labor and time. Boujikian says she and two of her roommates each work in the garden about 40 hours a week. They live at the center, a rundown house they're

slowly renovating into a resource for homeless people. (Kincaid, the center's namesake, was a homeless activist who died in 2007.)

Volunteer events, such as an Earth Day celebration, draw volunteers to weed, make garden beds, and dig the fish pond. Other support comes from Fresno City College. Mentors include sociology instructor Bernard Navarro and Life Sciences instructor Rodney Olsen, Boujikian says. And the college's Sustainable Actions club allows like minds to network.

As the center evolves, it will distribute seed and offer lessons in worm composting, raising fish for food and gardening. "We'll create a learning space of how to urban farm," Boujikian says. But that will take time. More

immediate is the expansion of the Scraps-to-Soil project. With McDougald and others collecting food waste in the Tower District, Boujikian is starting a new route in Downtown Fresno.

"We have these papers that explain the whole project," she says. "Ideally, you give them a bucket that day and then you're picking up that night or the next day."

Businesses likely won't reduce their trash bills by participating in the service. But Piemonte's co-owner Nancy Eberwein is motivated to do it anyway.

"I feel that it's good to have things go back into the earth and into the soil," she says. "I'm all about recycling. ... I would encourage more business and restaurants to get involved."