

NEIGHBORHOOD DIRT

STARTING A KITCHEN GARDEN

BY LAUREN DUFFY



So you want to garden, do you? That was the question I asked myself as I stared across the backyard, scanning the patches of dry ground between the fence walls and the patio. Yes, I could eagerly answer, I **want** to garden. I'm just not sure I know how.

You could say that I don't have the best track record with plants. Nor am I blessed with anything close to a green thumb. Yet I've always felt that gardening is something I should be able to tackle. At least, I felt that way until I actually tried digging into my backyard's rock-hard, urban clay soil. Waking up the next morning with a sore back and an even fiercer determination to grow my own food, I decided I needed guidance.

Karen Contreras was eager to come to my rescue. Her company, Urban Plantations, was started for people like me: people with the space and the desire to grow their own food, but who lack the technical know-how to get started.

"There are a lot of people who don't know how to do this but want to," Karen reassures me. "Gardening is kind of a lost art," she says. Urban Plantations provides what Karen calls "garden coaching"—helping people build, maintain and harvest an edible garden. So I ask her: what does someone who wants to start growing their own food need to know? Simple, she explains. "All you have to do is take care of the soil."

Paul Maschka would agree. Paul helps run San Diego City College's Urban Farm, a thriving $\frac{1}{3}$ acre fruit and vegetable garden on the City College campus. "We need to make a shift," Paul explains, toward "not feeding plants, but feeding the soil." Paul explains: "Plants need nutrients, not fertilizer. Nutrients come from the soil." By "feeding the soil"—adding organic matter, microorganisms and minerals—the soil becomes enriched with nutrients and in turn, "the soil will feed the plants."

To prepare the area that would become the City College Urban Farm, Paul—along with volunteers and a team of interns—used a technique called "sheet composting," which involves covering the ground with layers, or "sheets" of organic matter. By covering the ground and watering it regularly, Paul allowed the organic matter to work its way into the soil, ultimately making the soil more workable. To anyone looking to start an in-ground garden Paul suggests: "use different layers of material you have access to: leaves, weeds, cardboard, compost." Then he explains: "layer them, cover with mulch and soak well." Even before you have any plants in the soil, Paul advises treating the bed as if there were plants in it, watering the area regularly.

With the sheet composting process, Paul explains, you are "inoculating soil with beneficial organisms; they will condition the soil." As the organisms work into the soil, they make it easy to dig. The moisture soaks into the soil as well. "Infiltration changes the soil," Paul

explains, creating a nutrient-rich bed that is ready to be planted.

"That's the first step" to any garden, Paul explains. "Do this well before planting. Do it now."

A simpler way to inoculate the soil with nutrients is to use finished compost. Paul advises getting compost from the Miramar Greenery, which provides up to two cubic yards of free compost to San Diego residents—you just need to bring a shovel and a container or truck bed to haul it. Karen advises covering the soil with six inches of finished compost and another two inches of manure. The process is the same as with sheet mulching—covering the soil, watering it to add moisture and letting microorganisms go to work. After a few weeks with either process, you dig or rototill the area, working the organic matter into the soil.

While Paul and Karen's steps are for converting in-ground soil to garden beds, the advice holds true for raised beds and container planting. "Compost is the cornerstone of healthy soil," Paul explains. "Every time you plant, add compost."

There are also a variety of natural supplements that can improve the health of a soil—cottonseed meal, kelp, fish emulsion, gypsum, horse manure. At City College, fish emulsion is added to the soil every two weeks. The amendment, high in nitrogen and minerals, helps keep the soil rich and nutrient-dense. Another way to add nitrogen to the soil, if you have the time, is to plant a cover crop before you plant vegetables. Planting and harvesting a bed with a crop like crimson clover adds nutrients and nitrogen, improving the soil for when you are ready to plant vegetables.

As for where you do decide to place your garden, that depends on logistics, space availability and choice. Ideally, it should be a spot that gets a lot of sun (between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. is best.) "Exposure is the key thing," Paul says of choosing a location.

Karen and Paul both recommend considering the front lawn as a garden location. Paul prefers the front lawn as it lets others know you are gardening. Karen agrees—and sees it as a trend. She has three clients who all specifically want a garden in their front yard—even though they have space in the back.

Paul recommends working in small spaces—creating several small plots across the yard. "Break up [the garden] into small do-able plots. Put a few things in each plot," he suggests. This way, it's "not so overwhelming; not a major chore." His own garden is in "little mini plots that I can do in one afternoon after work."

Photographs: Donna McCloughlin

Breaking up a lawn is a great way to slowly transition from grass to garden. You can start with one plot and once that gets underway, start on another. When people try to do it all at once, Paul explains, it's an ordeal. By slowly doing one spot at a time, it's possible to slowly analyze a space. Paul thinks you should ask of each plant: "what are you providing?" The plant's services can be varied—attracting wildlife, providing food, providing beauty. "If a plant doesn't meet your criteria, replace it," he suggests.

Both Paul and Karen recommend letting creativity work its way into the planning stages. "An open plot is like an empty canvas," Paul muses. Rather than planting crops in traditional rows, Karen finds it's "more fun to make your landscape beautiful and unique." Paul suggests striving for a garden that is "diverse, creative, free-flowing, informal." He explains that "the more informal, the more forgiving" a garden will be.

Then there's what to plant. Paul says, "plant your favorite food." He recommends picking six of your favorites, then researching different varieties and finding strains of plants that specifically do well in dry climates and that require less water. After you get started, Paul suggests trying to plant "as many varieties in small space" as possible.

Julia Dashe, who works with Paul on the City College Urban Farm, suggests planting lots of perennials in addition to annuals. "It's important to have things in garden that are permanent," she explains. Perennials are less labor intensive than annuals and are often heartier. Additionally, many perennials attract beneficial insects and birds. Herbs such as rosemary and mint are popular perennials, as are some vegetables, like asparagus and Walking Stick Kale.

Julia explains that it is important that gardeners are "paying attention to seasonal changes, even if subtle." Even though San Diego's winters can be mild, summer crops like tomatoes and summer squash won't do well in the winter. However, she explains that in San Diego, gardeners can actually grow more things in the winter than the summer. Good winter crops include plants in the Brassica family—cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli—as well as fava beans and potatoes. "Alliums are also good—onions, garlic, chives. And root crops: turnips, parsnips."

Plants from the Brassica family, such as broccoli and Brussels sprouts, are particularly good for new gardens, because they have deep roots that help break up soil.

Karen's favorite winter crops are broccoli, cabbage, peas, kale and lettuce. She says, "garlic is really fun and easy to grow."

Paul says, "sweet potatoes do fantastic and they're a gorgeous ground cover." He likes amaranth, lots of types of kale, Florence Fennel, which is an Italian variety of fennel, and artichokes, which are a perennial. "I always plant too many artichokes," he says.

Armed with advice about soil and amendments and what exactly to plant, I felt I was ready to retackle my backyard soil. But I needed one more piece of advice. While strolling through the City College Urban Farm, I struck up a conversation with Marley Alexander-Peifer, one of the farm's four interns. "You can get technical advice anywhere," he claimed. But he's observed that so many people fail their first time gardening, because technical advice is all they have. "Get involved with other people doing it," Marley suggested. Find gardening organizations. Volunteer on a farm. If you can find support, "that's more important than technical advice or stuff."

That's what I needed. Before talking to Paul, and Karen, and Julia, and Marley, I was trying to do it alone. But after seeing successful gardens, being walked through the steps to build one and having passionate gardeners help troubleshoot my situation, I realized growing food is never something to go at alone.

Karen's vision is that one day, everyone will have vegetable gardens in their yard. "You can go to your neighbor and say, 'I have extra peas, you have extra lettuce. Let's share.'"

Right now my garden-to-be is under several layers of compost. Next weekend, I intend to plant my first seedlings. By the time this article comes out, I should have 80 square feet of garden and plenty of produce to share. Just ask me about it.

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PAUL MASCHKA'S STEPS TO CONVERT A LAWN:

In three months you will have a garden that is teeming and abundant. Start early in the season if you want to convert your lawn to an edible garden.

1. "Scalp the lawn." Cut the grass short, so short that you stress the leaves. Leave the grass clippings in place.
2. Soak well.
3. Cover with 3 inches finished compost. The Miramar landfill is a good source of compost.
4. Soak again.
5. Cover with 3 inches mulch or wood chips.
6. Keep irrigated, just as you would with a lawn (water daily). In 1 ½ weeks, the grass will have died. In 3 weeks, you can plant the soil.
7. Turn in compost. You can rototill in the compost, but not the mulch. Otherwise, turn in compost by hand.
8. Plant!
9. Cover soil. Bring mulch back or just cover with compost.

