

March 2013 Colin McCrate: Simple, edible garden design

RGC welcomed first-time speaker Colin McCrate from Seattle Urban Farm Company. Colin, fresh from a NW Flower & Garden Show lecture segment, co-founded his nationally recognized company in 2007 with partner Brad Halm. These guys are realists who get their hands dirty working a 1,200-square-foot test plot of their own at company headquarters, in addition to their client's sites. With the purpose in mind of empowering and advancing backyard farmers from residential clients to restaurants, schools, rooftops, communities and commercial gardens, the timing of their business coincides well in the whole food/organic trends, as well as a younger demographic. They've been featured in many magazines—Seattle Magazine listed them as “2012 Game Changers”—GQ, Sunset, Bon Appetit, Outside and countless newspaper articles. In addition, they've been asked to consult with other similar national startups. Colin also came equipped with a brochure, website (www.seattleurbanfarmco.com) and book entitled, “Food Grown Right, in Your Backyard”, which was available for signing. After surveying his audience, Colin quickly surmised that we were a savvy group, who were probably fully aware of the pitfalls and advantages of veggie gardening. However, undaunted, he shifted gears and quickly ascertained that after a brief overview of his slides, this time might be better spent in a question/answer session.... “since you guys as a garden club probably know all about the basics” (unlike the garden show folks).



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As a rule, they set up the process that they go through with their clients, which includes assessment of: 1) Sunlight (most important element), 2) Access and visibility, 3) Create a dedicated space, 4) Grade, 5) Irrigation, and 6) Soil. Sunlight was the most determinant factor on where best to have a successful veggie garden.

Sunlight: Your site should be evaluated throughout the day for most daylight hours (6 plus is good). Colin told us about an app that can be downloaded (Sunseeker) which helps take into consideration factors like the horizon, sun in all seasons, elevation, etc. No longer a guessing game, sunlight has now become a precise measurement with this tool. A question was raised about shade gardening—and the best veggies for this condition were shown to be salad greens, chives, etc. If sunny spots are in more than one section, beds can be created wherever those arise—even in containers or perennial beds. Colin went on to explain that veggie gardens are “very needy and sensitive plants”, but also very rewarding. Yes, it’s a time commitment, but if you just spend 1 hour per week (in a 100-200 sq. ft. bed) on your veggies (or 10 minutes/day), you’ll have a productive site and abundant crops to enjoy.

Access and visibility: Accessibility is also important for success. If you can see it and get to it easily, you’re more likely to spend time on it. Colin touched a bit on the Grade of a site, which they mitigate with terracing and building beds. Irrigation systems were briefly discussed with an emphasis on drip irrigation systems as the best. He recommends a DIG battery operated timer as a way to regulate watering, as well as a pressure regulator. Dripworks.com is a good source for all things irrigation.

Design Elements for the ideal bed construction should be no wider than 4 ft. x 8 ft. long and can use stone, fir (lasts about 5 years), cedar timbers soaked with Pro UV which slows the rotting process or juniper, a bit harder to find. Lastly, the addition of soil and its maintenance was a critical element for the bed creations and for great veggie growth. The health of your plants depends on the health of your soil. The first step should be to check your current pH as soon as possible, with the best pH between 6.3 and 6.9. After breaking up the sod in your site, lime may need to be added to bring acidic soil into the proper pH ranges. First rule: Always improve the soil right from the beginning. To rototill or not to rototill? Colin’s response was initially when creating the bed, it would be OK to mix the veggie garden mix or soil mix (1/3 sand, 1/3 compost and 1/3 loam topsoil) and organic fertilizers into the mounds or beds, but rototilling down 12 in. or more just ends up compacting the soil. Then leave it alone for several years and keep amending with compost/fertilizers.

Questions really began to roll with varied topics, such as: grouping families together in a bed, i.e., onions/squashes; crop rotation (as much as possible); red clover cover crops to improve soil and help eliminate cabbage loopers and other pests (as well as the non-invasive badminton rackets to swat moths); fencing for rabbits (go 1’ deep and 1’ out for the burrowing); growing artichokes in this region (mulch helps and harvest when it is immature); cilantro bolting (succession planting helps); basil success (plants don’t tolerate below 50 degrees, so set them out late); fennel bulbs bolting and not forming bulbs (finicky plant that can be affected by disturbed roots,

excessive heat or lack of water) and finally, we digressed into our NW nemesis--growing successful tomato crops.

There are no promises with tomatoes, he cautioned, who says the cherry tomato 'Sungold' produces even in a bad year and is a continual taste-test winner. Oregon Spring is an early ripener. Stupice also is a good variety for its extreme earliness, tolerance to cold and high yields. Heirloom varieties will not work well here. As we tend to suffer from amnesia and polyanna-thinking about this time of year with regard to tomatoes, some tricks can help ripen our warm-deprived tomato plants and keep them disease-resistant: 1) Choose the right type for your growing conditions and our short season (determinate like Northern Exposure and Sweet Tangerine or indeterminate like Early Girl and Burpee's Burger), 2) Plant them where they'll get the most sun/heat (raised bed against a south-facing wall for reflected heat), 3) Timing--when they go into the ground (usually around Mother's Day), 4) Fertilize (good organic humus with compost and manure mixed in), 5) Water (thoroughly twice a week until the end of August, then much less to stress the plant for ripening fruit, but no water on the leaves) and 6) Pruning (picking off all the flowers for the first month or so, so that the plant will get bushier and snapping off branches so that there are only 2 or 3 leaders), even root pruning in the fall to encourage ripening and removing all unnecessary leaves toward fall. Colin cautioned to be picky about selecting your tomato plants at nurseries.

If Colin had to limit his gardening to the 4' x 8' x 18' raised bed which he said is the ideal size, what would he grow? Although this was subjective and could change seasonally, he shot back quickly with "Cilantro, garlic, onions (Ailsa Craig, Prince varieties), leeks, potatoes, beans, kale, 'Sungold' tomatoes, definitely ... basil, arugula", but it mostly comes down to what you like and are successful growing. Another thought is to grow things that you like to eat, as well as those not found readily/cheaply in farmer's markets. Finally, Colin's enthusiasm for all things veggie encouraged us to just get out there and work the garden. There's nothing like appreciating the magic and taste of home-grown veggies in our beautiful "short" growing season. So many seeds, so many recipes.