

GATEWAY GARDENING

Whether it's an easier way to break into the world of gardening or simply a step toward healthier living, small-space gardening is getting noticed by new, urban and veteran gardeners alike.

By Pete Mihalek

You sell healthy living. That's the long and short of it, according to Slow Food Chicago leader Amy Cox. Cox is also the founder of subURBAN Homestead and Cutting Edge Culinary & Garden Consulting.

"Gardening is a very grounding activity, and we are living in a period of time that carries a lot of uncertainty," Cox says. "As a result, customers are literally looking for a way to get rooted. Four of the basic elements of wellness are easy access to healthy food, exercise, rest and individual ownership of power. All of these basics exist in a garden — regardless of how big or small it may be."

And while veteran green thumbs with flourishing plots are fully aware of gardening's holistic qualities, it's the up-and-coming wave of new, young and urban gardeners that are still in need of some well-deserved guidance.

No yard? Brown thumb? Growing food on a concrete patio? These are just a few of the usual suspects you hear on a daily basis. *Lawn & Garden Retailer* had a chance to catch up with some small-space, urban gardening experts and get a better idea of how to handle some of these customer concerns.

Analyzing Your Approach

"Most garden centers are set up for people with a decent-sized backyard," says garden celebrity William Moss. Moss is an urban gardener and a regular guest on CBS' "The Early Show."

"There may be plants that will do well on a smaller scale, but many times a garden center shopper won't find them grouped or featured that way. Take chili peppers for instance. Most of them will only grow two-feet tall and would do great in a small garden, but that's not something that's being promoted."

Moss is a firm believer in providing space-challenged customers with an educational setting, whether through informative displays or a class offering. "There are so many plants suitable for small places like an apartment with a balcony in the city or even for a townhome out in the suburbs with a limited front yard, and all we have to do is let them know what they are."

Along those very same lines, Moss notes that many of today's new gardeners come from an urban setting, or at the very least, would like to start gardening on a smaller scale.

"New and urban gardeners are a different breed and many of them are



Photo credit: Penny Stankiewicz



Whether it's disease-resistant tomato varieties or alternatives to window boxes, urban gardener Penny Stankiewicz of Brooklyn, N.Y., would like to see more variety at her local garden centers for those gardeners working with small spaces.

getting into our industry through vegetables," Moss says. "Along with showcasing plants best for small spaces, also remember that companion planting can be an important part of this process, which is something newbies are more than likely unaware of." He says the concept of companion planting can have a two-fold benefit for retailers: additional plant sales and customers leaving your store with a better chance of success. Just by grouping some herbs that work well together in a window box in your herb section you can give

customers a visual point of reference and a little bit of confidence because you put that assortment together.

As for maximizing the shopping experience for new and urban gardeners, Moss says the furniture industry can be a great source of inspiration. "Furniture stores allow people to come into a setting and show them what something can look like in their space and that's not something impossible to replicate at a garden center," he says.

"My balcony is 10 feet by three feet. That's not a lot of space and most people might just put one railing planter out there, and that's a shame because you can still do a lot in a space that size. We need to make sure we let them know that. It's hard to imagine something if you haven't seen it before."

The Bread and Butter

Moving from an urban gardener to an urban garden center, Rose Red & Lavender started out as a floral shop in the hip Williamsburgh neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. Due to demand, this retailer broadened its offering to appease the growing interest in urban gardening.

"I can safely say that 99.9 percent of our

customers are urban gardeners," says owner Kimberly Sevilla. She adds that most of them are beginners, but beginners who have done their homework. "Some of the questions people ask are funny, for example: 'How can I test and adjust my water?'" There is so much — too much — information available on the Internet." Sevilla and her team at Red Rose & Lavender aim to simplify the process for new gardeners by carrying products that they know will work and carrying varieties well suited for containers.

Sevilla also focuses on creatively using what space is available to show her customers the endless possibilities of gardening, no matter the location. "I love playing around with found items and creating gardens with them," she says. "We have random sinks mounted to walls, bathtub plantings, dresser drawer gardens and tire planters in our shop."

In addition to creativity, Red Rose & Lavender customer Penny Stankiewicz turns to her urban garden center looking for answers in plant care and disease prevention. "Because my neighbor is six inches from me, I have problems with fungi and diseases, especially with vegetable plants, so heirlooms are out for me," says Stankiewicz. "I would love to see some interesting hybrids locally, that are preselected, so I know they'll do well. I don't have a lot of space to take guess on tomatoes."

Classes that address recognizing, diagnosing and treating common problems in more urban settings appeal to this Brooklyn resident and chef. "Was it bad watering or was I dealing with a serious disease?" she asks. "It can be tough to diagnose these problems even with the help of the Internet, because it's not always easy com-

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Due to poor soil conditions in Reno, Nev., Rail City Garden Center positions itself as the city's square-foot gardening resource. The garden center's demonstration gardens show customers that gardens can grow anywhere, literally.

paring a plant sample in your hand to a photo on the screen.”

Stankiewicz adds she'd like to see more unique options for railings and tight spaces — something other than window boxes.

As for fertilizers and soil, she is much in line with Red Rose & Lavender's organic offerings. “Being a chef, food and sound practices with food are very important to me,” she says. “It's also sort of known that urban soil like in Brooklyn

might not be the best choice for gardening.”

And because she doesn't have the room for a large plastic composter, she uses worm castings to enrich her soil, which has come with repeated success.

Learn By Seeing

Coming straight from the Mel Bartholomew school of thought on square-foot gardening, Pawl Hollis and his staff at Rail City Garden Center in Reno, Nev., are firm believers in starting small.

“We *are* a square-foot garden center and we strongly recommend to everyone to start small,” Hollis says. “Start with a tomato and a big pot. When your customer has success with that and can learn from that, they will come back and expand.”

The reason Hollis has taken to square-foot gardening in a big way is due to Reno's poor soil conditions. Because of that, Rail City creates demonstration gardens in some of the garden center's more non-garden friendly areas.

“Our demonstration gardens here are in some unlikely places — like on top of concrete walls, patios, asphalt,” the Rail City owner says. “We can really show our customers that gardens can be grown anywhere, literally. You don't have to have an acre, a tractor, bib overalls and

a straw hat to grow edibles.”

Since Rail City began putting in its demonstration vegetable gardens, Hollis has taken note of a common customer catchphrase: “I want that.”

“If they see it, touch it and even get a chance to taste it, they're sold on it,” Hollis says. “It gives them something to emulate.”

In addition to the inspiration Rail City provides its small-space garden shoppers, it provides a complete shopping experience. After reading a thorough “How to build a square-foot garden” article in a consumer publication, Hollis and his team got to work building basic square-foot garden frames equipped with necessary irrigation. Rail City also sells a ready-mixed soil ideal for square-foot gardens — 1/3 peat moss, 1/3 vermiculite and 1/3 compost.

“We get customers who want a vegetable garden, but come in to shop having done little preparation,” he says. “That's why we have a sales checklist (garden size, soil mix, irrigation, plants, etc.) that equates to dollars for us.

“While everyone wants everything cheaper, customers also want things to be easier, and if we can make their experience easier, they'll become a confident gardener.”

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