



Executive chef Corey Heyer of The Bernards Inn inspects the garden in Far Hills where the restaurant gets its vegetables.

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Kitchen gardens making a comeback

Local chefs, homeowners dig in to grow their own vegetables

BY JANET LEONARDI • CORRESPONDENT • JULY 10, 2008

As food and fuel prices continue to soar this summer, it's no surprise the [home](#) vegetable garden is experiencing a bountiful rebirth.

More and more Central Jersey chefs and residents are planting and tending [kitchen](#) gardens, modern-day versions of the once-famous victory gardens created in backyards out of necessity by the food and fuel shortages of World War II.

Bruce Crawford, director of Rutgers Gardens in New Brunswick, acknowledges the trend and awakened interest in once again growing our own.

“We noticed an increased demand for vegetable plants at our sale last May and sold out early,” he says. “Home-grown vegetables, as well as those produced locally and sold at farmers’ markets, are once again gaining in popularity.”

Crawford attributes this in part to the rising cost of fuel but points out there's now a better understanding of the [environmental](#) effects of shipping food around the world, saying, “Home and locally grown produce provides improved taste and freshness.”



Eight different kinds of vegetables picked by chefs from The Bernards Inn.

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Corey Heyer, executive chef at the highly acclaimed Bernards Inn in Bernardsville long has been an advocate of using fresh, locally grown produce in his dishes. But this season, for the first time, Heyer designed and planted a chef's garden in nearby Far Hills, and he picks fresh produce there every couple of days.

"It's exciting, and we built our summer menu around what we planted," Heyer says.

The garden, which includes 12 varieties of tomatoes and lettuces; English peas, wax, French, fava and string beans; squash; spinach and beets, also has a separate area for growing herbs.

Chives, coriander, dill, parsley, rosemary and basil are among the many flourishing herbs, and Heyer points out that "Chervil, which can often be in short supply and expensive from suppliers, grows like a weed here. We also have several types of lesser-known, hard-to-find types of mint — including pineapple, orange and chocolate."

Millstone resident Joann Kelty says she enjoys tilling a fertile plot behind her vintage farmhouse.

"I've got Italian blood so I grow tomatoes for sauce, as well as other family favorites including peas, green beans, squash, lettuce, spinach, basil, oregano, dill, chives and sage," she says.

Kelty says even her favorite seed store sold out of seed potatoes early this season, further indicating of the public's rekindled interest in kitchen gardening.

"I also dry my herbs because growing and preserving produce has the added bonus of saving money on food and also the gas to drive to the store," she says.

Ted Zeller, a Tewksbury property owner, recently created his first kitchen garden complete with walking paths and raised beds.

"I thoroughly enjoy the experience of growing garlic, celery, tomatoes, lettuce and parsley and plan on adding even more plants," he says. "We've learned there's nothing better or more flavorful than picking fresh from the garden and enjoying the produce immediately."

Don't have space for a garden? Mike DeAngelis, a chef and Franklin Park condo owner, says there are options.

"I have a planter on my patio where I'm growing basil, opal basil, cilantro, flat-leaf parsley and rosemary," he says. "Herbs taste better snipped right before using, and growing your own certainly beats paying supermarket prices."

DeAngelis, who recently returned from a month-long vocational/cultural program in Italy, just brought back a new herb called herba di San Pietro.

"I've never seen it before," he says, "but it has a really nice lemon, basil, marjoram flavor, and I'm trying to get some seeds to get it going over here."

So it doesn't seem to matter if your home-grown vegetables are in large or small pots; kitchen gardens are making a plentiful comeback, and this time it seems they're here to stay.



Executive chef Corey Heyer works in one of the vegetable gardens in Far Hills before making his final choices.

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Chefs John Boot and Craig Polignano of The Bernards Inn walk through the vegetable garden in Far Hills.

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