

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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When Life Gives You Lemons, Grow Organic Vegetables

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio

When the best-laid plans get sidetracked, it helps to have a back-up strategy. Last year, when Leonard Pouder put a For Sale sign on the nursery, there were no takers. Nonetheless, instead of waiting for something to happen, Leonard hired a farm manager and cleared the land for an organic vegetable garden with hopes of selling produce and educating locals about farming.

Nestled in a residential area of New Rochelle, New York, 18 miles north of Manhattan, Lieb's Nursery and Garden Center began under a different name in 1910 and was owned by Henry Wagner, who grew cut flowers to supply his area stores. He ran the operation until 1921 when Werner Lieb purchased the business. He continued to grow cut flowers in wooden benches.

In the mid-1950s, Leonard's father, George, purchased the 3.5 acres that encompassed Lieb's and kept the name. They continued the tradition of growing flowers, added annuals from seed and rooted cuttings, and made soil from compost—all with very few chemicals.

Leonard studied landscape design and horticulture in school. He started at his dad's place in 1981 and has been the owner since 1990. He had always wanted to get into the landscape business.

"We did well and it is ever-growing," says Leonard. "We backed off growing cut flowers and now do primarily landscape—my landscape design and construction is the breadwinner at 75% of the business," says Leonard.

While the landscape business was flourishing, growing was becoming less cost-effective. Consequently, they brought in pre-finished or plugs.

"Growing was not making sense spiritually and economically with the oil and energy use," says Leonard. "The business changed; we were doing more landscape and design with organic property care."

As time went on, Leonard dreamed of keeping the landscape business—but being selective about the jobs

he took—and of having a small working farm in northwestern Connecticut where he could hunt and fish, grow veggies, and raise rabbits and chicken for meat. His wife Gabi, a professional chef, trained at the Institute of Culinary Education. She would prepare and sell the organic foods that would be raised and grown on the property. Their dream was dependent upon the sale of the nursery, but ...

The sale didn't happen, so last winter Leonard; Michael Butts, a botanist and Leonard's farm manager; and Gabi planned a 1-acre vegetable garden at Lieb's.

"We made a list of what we liked and what the public liked as a result of the in-house survey given to customers through the door," says Leonard. They added crops like mizuna to the list as a result of the survey.

Following a soil test and amendments with years-old compost that was made on the property, close to 70 varieties and cultivars of vegetables were grown from organic seed.

"An organic farm has always been in my head. It seems like a natural fit to diversify," says Leonard. "There is nothing in the area that sells organic vegetables that are picked that day. We have a renewed commitment to progressive recycling, organics, composting and rain water use."

The garden was well-received with its heirloom tomatoes, Swiss chard, kale, broccoli, potatoes and onions, but at a loss of investment. "I thought eventually the demand would outweigh the supply," Leonard says, "Twenty minutes from here are millions of people. [The garden] can be a retreat for concrete-bound urban dwellers."

Those who did come as customers from the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn were there for the healthy food.

"People came to buy mid-June lettuces. Every person through the door of the nursery was put on the mailing list and was emailed a list of what was ready in the garden along with recipes," says Leonard.

While the garden generated a buzz, Leonard thought that the word should have spread quicker.

"It took off very slowly. The idea is more romantic than realistic because they have the ease of the supermarket," he says.

Veggies weren't the only things being eaten from the garden. When Leonard found a squash vine borer problem, he performed entomophagy—which is consuming insects as food—and had the bugs for a snack. You don't get more organic than that.

A possible next step for the garden is to allow people to rent and develop plots of land to be used as personal organic gardens. To ensure that the gardens remain organic, customers must sign a contract that no pesticides will be used. Leonard will provide resources, compost, organic soil and most important, education.

Tips for other growers:

- Careful planning is painstaking, but it's critical to take the time to plan what you're going to do—the cost, how to sell and what the return will be.

- Most of us do everything—you have to be self-sufficient and should be required to plan, unless you have money to burn.
- Recycle as much as possible—break down your garbage and waste. Just about everything except metal, glass and plastic gets composted here. **GT**

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio is a freelance writer in New Rochelle, New York.