

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Chefs' Garden

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Moving through her day with enough energy to illuminate the island of Manhattan and a portion of New Jersey, Joanie Dinowitz has had careers as a bond trader, chef and sales manager for a handmade rug designer before landing on her present calling ... steward of the Earth.

As a full-time energy auditor, she advises homeowners of the changes they can make to improve the efficiency of their homes; similar to the changes she and her family have made to their home with the addition of solar panels and cellulose

insulation.

With a deep respect for food and its origin, Joanie plotted a small garden in their yard upon the family's move from New York City to a Hudson River town in 2000. Her boys were toddlers when they planted broccoli, tomatoes and lettuce with their mom. "I'm into good food as a chef," she says. "I source the provenance."

In 2012, Joanie teamed up with guitarist Mark Mazur, who had gardened at a community plot for 20 years. Joanie called it an experimental year. They knew a number of chefs at local restaurants and approached them with boutique items like 100 heirloom tomatoes that they had grown in Joanie's yard, knowing that the chefs wanted to give their customers farm-to-table experiences.

Last season, their first sale was in mid-July. They serviced five restaurateurs with six to seven restaurants. One chef requested a Langdon FarmsNY exclusive. Joanie and Mark gave him 100 lbs. of Chinese long beans throughout the season.

When a neighbor spotted Joanie at a permaculture workshop, they compared their lawns. His is shady, while her yard is flat and sunny. She agreed to grow for him. This year when he opened a creperie, Joanie planted arugula and Bordeaux spinach. "He understood well-sourced, nutritive food," she says.

Presently, she has fenced a 50 ft. by 70-ft. space in her back yard with split rails and metal mesh to keep out

the deer and the climbing groundhog. She grows in raised beds, earth berms and even a retired wheelbarrow with drilled drainage holes.

Joanie is a Master Composter and keeps a number of compost piles in the back of the growing area. A framework for beans is in the center of the garden, while an intern-built brick-bordered berry-walk curves in a back corner opposite the compost. Blackberries, raspberries and soon-to-be-tiered strawberries will adorn that area.

There are no delivery trucks or employees—just five interns from the local high schools. Joanie gives them an education in growing that includes hard labor at times, which she says might push them toward desk jobs, although, growing is impressive.

“The kids were fascinated to see the cucumbers and beans germinate after they had planted them. It was powerful—there were ooohs and aaahs,” she says.

This spring after their successful and educational experimental year, Joanie and Mark grew Swiss chard, beets, arugula, chamomile, raspberries, turnips, potatoes in a wheelbarrow, bush beans, rattlesnake beans, carrots, onions, spinach, garlic, parsley, sunflowers, bok choy, kale and more.

“I should be mono-crop, but I was interested in knowing how the other crops grow,” says Joanie. Many factors make up the produce results. “It’s about timing and the vagaries of Mother Nature,” she says. “It takes the pressure off me if the plants are healthy. The beauty of organic gardening is when the plant is healthy, the immune system is good and it is better equipped to fight ...” For instance, something like powdery mildew. “And research can be done with a smartphone,” she adds.

Mark was pleased with this season’s turnout. Their first produce sale was in May. “We laid out all the beds last year and had an increase from 80 to 100 percent this year,” says Mark. In 2012 Mark and Joanie took their chances with growing produce. “We said, ‘Let’s see if it sells,’ and it sold!” he says.

“We’re in the lucky position to be small,” says Joanie. “The chefs request the food and then show off our food. The chefs make salads that don’t taste like anything else the customer has eaten.” The chefs and restaurateurs make requests for produce that Joanie and Mark have grown or can grow. Some chefs tour the garden to “tag” items.

“Our customers are chefs; they care about the taste of food. The best chefs are people who understand why something needs to be high-priced ... and they have reputations of discerning palates,” says Joanie.

Not only are chefs customers—friends and neighbors can buy produce from Joanie and Mark. They save and exchange seeds. A local high school graduate showed up at Joanie’s house to pick up seeds. They can propagate the seeds on Joanie’s property or in a heated, ventilated greenhouse owned by Mark’s friend.

Last year, Joanie made soil blocks for the tomatoes using specially mixed slurry. As a chef, Joanie can make a recipe whether it’s for a soil block or for food. “A recipe is natural,” she says. “I am very into sustainability; I am reading all the time and pinching off leaves. I can’t replicate this on a grand scale. We have a boutique

product, a specialized monopoly. We set the upper limit on flavor and the quality of the soil. I do delicious!"

Mark's goals for this year are to sell more and have fun; Joanie's are to eat well and teach the interns well. Teach them that they will grow to be the next generation of stewards of the Earth. **GT**

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