

NATURE'S BEST Organic gardening pro Jeanne Pinsof Nolan in her home garden.



From Farm to Family

Organic gardener Jeanne Pinsof Nolan creates green spaces designed to grow food and the family unit | By Kate Templin | Photography by Jill Paider |

Some women have green thumbs. Others, like Jeanne Pinsof Nolan, are green from head to toe. Nolan, a Winnetka native who spent almost 20 years working on organic farms in California, Texas and North Carolina, moved home and started her own business, The Organic Gardener, in 2005. Since then, the Glencoe-based company has helped hundreds of families in Chicago and on the North Shore create their own vegetable gardens by conceptualizing, installing and maintaining outdoor areas designed to bring kids, parents and Mother Nature together. Nolan—who also helped create the Uncommon Ground restaurant rooftop garden and, with the Green City Market, the Lincoln Park Zoo's Edible Gardens experience at the Farm-in-the-Zoo—sat down with us to talk about the global impact of her homegrown enterprise.

(NOLAN'S FAVORITES)

Amanda Little's must-read book, *Power Trip*; Ho-Mi EZ Digger (a traditional Korean hand plow that dates back more than 5,000 years); Johnny's Selected Seeds garden catalog, the Boundary Waters in Minnesota; North Pond; Prairie Grass Café; Green City Market; Abbey Brown Soap Artisan

How did you end up on a farm? I discovered organic food in 1987, when I was 18. It was a big moment for me, and it hit me that I wanted to go work on a farm, so I moved to Southern California and took an apprenticeship on a 75-acre organic farm. I spent the next 17 years living on three organic farms in Southern California, Austin and Asheville.

So that was the inspiration behind *The Organic Gardener*? I moved home in 2004 and put a garden in my parents' backyard in Winnetka, and I loved it. It was taking the skills I learned on the farm, but instead of putting in 300 tomato plants, I'd put in six. Six years later, we've installed hundreds of gardens in private homes around Chicago.

Why are gardens so important for families? Studies show that when families grow fruits and veggies, they're more likely to eat those foods. Also, we live in such a fast-paced, technology-focused society that all of us, but especially children, are rather disconnected from the Earth.

Apparently the Obamas agree. Something is definitely happening in our country. The Obamas' vegetable garden is a representation of a shift. We're faced with so many crises—obesity, diabetes, global warming—that reconnecting with the Earth will help.

How does your company make it easier for families to do that? We're full-service. We'll design a garden to work with your home and landscape, we'll bring the plants and seeds and we'll facilitate a family planting day. For families who don't want to or can't keep up with their gardens, we'll even come in and maintain them.

So how many clients do you work with in a typical year? This year we'll have more than 100 clients (some full installations, others consulting).

Have you done any downtown gardens? How is that different than the burbs? I've done rooftop, container and in-ground vegetable gardens in the city. It's a bit more complicated... sometimes the soil is too toxic and special raised beds need to be installed. Rooftops also need to be set up to bear the enormous weight of wet soil. Space is more limited. But all of these factors can be worked with. We've worked with many city schools, restaurants, institutions and families in the city. It's fun and rewarding. ■

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