

Fast Food

Jeanne and Verd Nolan began their front yard food garden in 2008. It's beautiful, bountiful and all organic.



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Once upon a time—think the 1920s and some decades beyond—a French country manor in Glencoe, designed by David Adler, presided over acres of woodland, lawn and formal flower and vegetable gardens that were tended by estate gardeners with lifetimes of experience and savvy.

But times changed, and the estate was threatened with demolition and development. Eventually it was saved by a couple who combined love of great architecture, energy to tackle renovation projects and the smarts to rent their handsome gatehouse to Jeanne Pinsof Nolan and her husband Verdant, a pair who could rival the fabled gardeners of yore in their passion for and knowledge of vegetable gardening. Together, in the last three years, they have created a knock-your-socks-off vegetable garden on the site of an original garden shown in Adler's plan.

And what a site it is. High stucco walls, planted on the roadside with ferns and ivy and climbing hydrangea, enclose a courtyard with the French country style gatehouse on one side and a wide sunny expanse of garden and a low greenhouse on the other. Ahead, down a long tree-lined allée, one can glimpse the manor house. Visual boundaries enclose their endeavor while a white wooden fence, lined with rabbit-proof wire and topped with high netting, has been installed to keep out the deer.

In early June when I visited, the crops were young and the structure of the garden was evident—divided in quadrants with straw-lined paths marching through the large sections. The first thing that Nolan was anxious to point out was the fabulous texture of her soil, the result of truckloads of high quality compost (a leaf/manure blend), sand, and organic soil fertilizer/conditioner (kelp, greensand, etc.) that she and Verd brought in before they started to lay out the garden two years ago. "For an organic gardener, the soil is the foundation," she says. "Nothing happens without great soil."

Organic gardening is the ideal these days, but growing up in Winnetka, Jeanne Nolan was way ahead of the curve. "When I was 18 in 1987, I heard



A fruit tree or a berry bush can be grown as an espalier when there's a handy wall nearby. At the Nolans' garden, a bare stucco wall is a perfect backdrop for the apple tree shown here. Espaliers can also be free-standing structures of sturdy posts and wires. The branches can be trained to run horizontally along the wires.



With a clearly defined structure and a mix of flowers with the food crops, an edible garden can be beautiful as well as utilitarian. In late summer pink flowering sedum and turtlehead (*Chelone*) bloom robustly. Blue Adirondack chairs add a welcoming touch.

about organic food and I knew that was what I wanted to do," she explains. "I wanted to go and learn how to grow food." She left Winnetka for an apprenticeship on an organic farm in the high desert of California near the Mexican border. After five years, that led to working and teaching on a 300-acre farm outside Austin, Texas, that sold organic produce to farmers' markets and Whole Food stores. "That's where I learned I didn't want to do large-scale growing and selling," she says. But she loved the teaching. And during her six years there Verd arrived from Oak Park on a similar quest. Her last position before she returned to the Chicago area in 2004 was on a farm in the hill country outside Asheville, North Carolina. "That served me well in that I learned to operate under any conditions, make any conditions work."

Back in Chicago after farming for 17 years on three very different terrains, she was introduced to the late Abby Mandel, the legendary garden columnist and founder of the Green

City Market, whom she considers her mentor. Nolan became project manager at Green City, put in the edible garden at Lincoln Park Zoo, cooked up gardening projects in a number of schools, started her business and, in its second year, married Verd. Abby Mandel, who lived across the road from the wonderful David Adler estate, knew the owners and suggested Jeanne and Verd as the perfect tenants/garden wizards to give advice for their struggling veggie garden. In the fall of 2007, the Nolans began their quest to restructure and maintaining the garden.

So when you have a large sunny site, enthusiasm to spare and a few strong, willing helpers, how do you go about creating a fabulous vegetable garden? Nolan's plan took into account what was already there—mainly some lovely old fruit trees, giant rhubarb plants and a variety of small fruits such as gooseberries, currants and strawberries (to which she has added raspberries.) Nolan believes that no garden can be successful without starting with the

proper mechanics, and for her that meant amending the soil, raising one boggy quadrant of the garden with those aforementioned amendments, plus installing raised beds enclosed in timbers, an irrigation system and that rabbit-proof fence.

Nolan is always conscious of aesthetics. Having designed a number of front-yard vegetable gardens for clients, she planned the Glencoe garden to be in her front yard as well. Hence it needed structure and color while remaining what it was—a veggie garden in all its glory, with little of the bare space and declining plant life that often characterize the genre.

"I wanted it to be pretty," she says. "I made plant choices with that in mind. Not just green beans, but the tri-color ones—purple, green and yellow. Ruby and rainbow chard. All the bright colors of peppers. Many colors of tomatoes." Even below ground she goes for color with 'Easter Egg' radishes and red, purple and yellow carrots. In late summer, ripening pears and apples add to the show.



The estate gatehouse where Jeanne and Verdant Nolan live is fronted by a large edible garden divided into quadrants with neatly arranged beds that feature an attractive blend of organically grown flowers and food-producing crops. Key to the success of this endeavor, Jeanne asserts, is the "fabulous texture of the soil."



Of course, corn can be grown in the front yard. So can all edible plants. Key to the Nolans' success is a well-thought-out series of neatly delineated rectangular beds with straw-covered paths to hold down weeds and allow easy access, even on wet days. Mixing flowers amidst the food crops adds to the beauty and makes just walking through the garden an adventure of discovery.



Top: An espaliered pear tree produces a fine crop against a stucco wall while cucumbers thrive atop a bed of straw mulch. Above: A cucumber ripens atop a bed of mulch.

Textures are important as well. The spiky leaves of leeks contrast with the crinkled ones of cabbages and chard. The beautiful veins on the bok choy leaves stand out near a wide row of dark green spinach. The wispy vines of the snap peas climbing their trellis have at their feet the bright chartreuse and maroon curly waves of spring lettuces.

Flowers are integral to the plan, as they are in a French potager, certainly an appropriate model for the garden of a French country house. A peony hedge anchors one corner of the garden, and a quadrant has been reserved for the estate owners, hands-on gardeners themselves who grow mainly perennials and roses that keep that part of the garden vibrant all summer. Nolan plants annuals among the rows of vegetables—black-eyed Susans appear with the beans, a great velvety celosia in the midst of the basil and so on. Fresh flower transplants and edibles are regularly popped into bare spots left by crops that have been harvested.

And of course, neatness counts. The wide grassy paths between and around the raised beds are lush and inviting. Within the beds themselves, the plants are protected with a straw mulch that also forms paths from which Nolan tends and harvests. She believes in keeping crops off the ground and has supplied the garden with a variety of trellises and supports. Especially efficient are her Texas tomato towers, sturdy wire cages that can be stacked up to three tiers high and stored flat.

The Nolans have an eight-year-old who is mad about the garden and makes her own choices of things to plant each year. "When we have too much, she fills the wagon and sets up a vegetable stand," says her proud mother. They also have a toddler who at present likes best to eat dirt and pull up young transplants, a perfect introduction to the idea that gardening is fun. When the family takes a break on a summer's evening to enjoy what they have created, there's a delightful set of French blue Adirondack chairs (the same blue as the trim on the house) set in a little clearing in the middle of the garden, waiting for them at the end of a busy day. 🌱