



L.A. gardener Jimmy Williams and his son, Logan, plant West African tomato seeds passed down from Jimmy's great-great-grandmother.

Vegetable-Garden Gurus

A new generation of organic gardeners will not only plant and tend your vegetable plot, they'll even leave baskets of just-picked produce on your doorstep.

by ratha tep

FOR LOCAVORES WHO ARE FANATICAL about knowing where their food comes from, buying organic produce at a nearby farmers' market is no longer enough: Now they're hiring personal gardeners to tend backyard vegetable plots, shortening the distance between farm and table to mere feet. "People are realizing that food grown in their yard is better than anything they can buy," says Jimmy Williams of Hayground Organic Gardening in Los Angeles. "Just about all of my customers tell me they never knew lettuce could be sweet." Gardeners like Williams interview clients to find out what they cook, how

often and for how many, then they plant accordingly. Many of these gardeners also do weekly maintenance, including weeding, composting and harvesting, leaving washed produce in a basket on the client's doorstep. Williams has several customers who strictly eat only produce that grows on their own land, so he plants a range of varieties that reach their peaks at different times to ensure that fresh fruits and vegetables are available nearly year-round. Turn the page for profiles of three top personal gardeners around the country, along with superfast recipes from F&W Assistant Editor Kristin Donnelly that use the produce they grow.

gardeners for hire

your backyard farmer portland, or

WHEN DONNA SMITH, 50, AND ROBYN STREETER, 30 (LEFT), DECIDED TO start a farm, they faced a challenge: They didn't own land. So the two became personal organic gardeners. Their two-year-old company, Your Backyard Farmer, in Portland, Oregon, now handles more than 60 gardens and offers monthly lessons on tasks like staking tomatoes for clients who want to take a more active role. Smith and Streeter still don't have any land, but they've begun supplying produce to local restaurants and the high-end grocery store Pasta Works. "We have a bartering system with a landowner," Smith explains. "She lets us grow vegetables on her land in exchange for produce. She eats very well." 503-449-2402 or yourbackyardfarmer.com.



the organic gardener chicago

"PARENTS WILL TELL ME, 'I HAVE WANTED TO PLANT A VEGETABLE GARDEN with my kids forever to teach them where food comes from, but it's overwhelming,'" says Jeanne Pinsof Nolan, 39, of Chicago's The Organic Gardener, which has installed or consulted on more than 100 gardens over the past three years. When Nolan plants a garden, she works side-by-side with children and parents and teaches as she goes. She knows what varieties go over well with kids, like Chioggia beets ("They look like peppermint candy") and Bright Lights chard, with its red, orange and yellow stalks. In part, that's because Nolan teaches school groups at the 5,000-square-foot Edible Garden at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. She also maintains the kitchen garden at North Pond restaurant for F&W Best New Chef 2003 Bruce Sherman. 847-636-2720.

hayground organic gardening los angeles

WHEN JIMMY WILLIAMS OF L.A.'S HAYGROUND ORGANIC GARDENING started his business 12 years ago, he lugged his tools on the bus, alone. Now, the 55-year-old has a pickup truck and a staff of eight—including his son, Logan, 22—and runs plant stalls at the Hollywood and Santa Monica farmers' markets. This spring, for the first time, he is also creating gardens for restaurants, such as Lou's Wine Bar. Williams is known for growing rare and exotic plants: He offers more than 1,000 varieties, including 15-foot-high collard-green trees and thorn chayote (right), which tastes like an artichoke heart. His superjuicy Goose Creek tomato is a family heirloom: "The seeds were passed down from my great-great-grandmother, who smuggled them when she was brought as a slave from West Africa to Goose Creek, South Carolina," Williams says. 323-216-0379.



superfast recipes

heirloom tomatoes

SPAGHETTI WITH FRESH HEIRLOOM TOMATO SAUCE

In a saucepan of boiling salted water, cook spaghetti until al dente, then drain. Toss the hot pasta with olive oil, then toss with diced heirloom tomatoes, minced garlic and torn herbs like basil, mint and parsley. Season with salt and pepper and serve, passing grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese at the table.

chioggia beets

RAW BEET SALAD WITH MINT AND QUICK-PICKLED ONIONS

Cover thinly sliced onions with white wine vinegar, season with salt and let stand. Toss frisée and mint with olive oil; season with salt and pepper. Slice peeled Chioggia beets on a mandoline and arrange around the frisée on plates. Top with the onions; serve.

chayote

SPICY CHAYOTE SLAW WITH LIME AND CILANTRO

Peel, halve and pit a chayote and cut it into 2-inch matchsticks. In a bowl, cover thinly sliced red onion with fresh lime juice and let stand 10 minutes. Whisk in olive oil. Add the chayote matchsticks and a minced seeded jalapeño, season with salt and pepper and toss. Just before serving, add finely chopped cilantro and toss. Serve with grilled fish.

PHOTOGRAPHS: BIANCA BENSON (STREETER/PORTLAND), ETHAN PINES (THORN CHAYOTE/L.A.)