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Jeanne Pinsof Nolan

A devoted organic gardener shares her gardening smarts

WRITTEN BY MERVYN KAUFMAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSAN VARICK



ABOVE: With baby Kisten strapped on, Nolan tends her raspberry patch. This portion of her garden includes gooseberries, currants, strawberries and blueberries.

■ **WHO** An organic gardening expert and creator of The Organic Gardener, Ltd., which helps businesses as well as families establish their own organic gardens.

■ **WHAT** Nolan shares her knowledge and advice on creating and maintaining prolific gardens in soil that is free from pollutants and inorganic materials.

■ **WHERE** The vegetable gardens she has established on the four-acre property she and her family live on and farm in Glencoe, Illinois, plus a sampling of organic gardens she designed in other Illinois towns, including Winnetka, where she grew up.



Jeanne Pinsof Nolan and her family rent a two-bedroom home that was once part of an historic Glencoe, Illinois, estate built in 1920 in the Normandy-French style. The two-story carriage house sits on a four-acre site that includes four garden quadrants extending back to privacy-abetting woods, beyond which are ravines leading to Lake Michigan. “We can see the lake from our upstairs bedrooms,” she says. Nolan can also see the rabbits, coyotes and an occasional red fox that prowls her property threatening the garden. One of its four quadrants, maintained by the owners, is strictly decorative, with row after row of floral plantings. The other three quadrants are Nolan’s to work with, and since October 2007 she has made them a showcase of ideas on organic gardening.



OPPOSITE RIGHT: The Nolans' landlord maintains the floral-only quadrant, filling it with decorative flowers. Beyond it, Nolan has planted heirloom tomatoes that grow so high that each plant requires a stack-up of three tomato cages.

ABOVE: Zinnias, marigolds and black-eyed Susans flourish among the rows of tricolor beans, red Swiss chard and sweet corn in this

vegetable-garden quadrant. An 80-year-old grape vine envelops the windows of the Nolans' home.

RIGHT: Speckled romaine and sugar-snap peas coexist comfortably in this corner of one vegetable garden.

BELOW RIGHT: Sinuous pods of yellow wax beans are ready for plucking. Green and purple string beans also grow profusely.



Why has gardening organically become so popular?

First and foremost, people want to eat better. They want to know that the food they eat is safe and nutritious, free from pesticides and commercial fertilizers. People also yearn to be more self-reliant and give their children real cycle-of-life experiences. People concerned about global warming are eager to reduce their carbon footprint.

How would you describe the benefits of organic gardening?

The food that's grown is delicious. Inspiring. Amazing! And gardening itself is therapeutic. I believe dirt is the new Prozac. I'm so happy in my garden. I know the food I'm growing is clean; I know what I'm ingesting. For me, it's meditative. I think you feel good when you know you're growing food.





Can you offer tips for gardeners eager to go organic?

Set aside an area in your yard that gets six to eight hours a day of full sunlight. Find out from a nursery worker if you need to test your soil for lead or harmful toxins. You may have to bring in new soil or add layers of compost. Or you can create organic gardens in containers or raised beds. Keep in mind that a vegetable garden may not look gorgeous all year. You may not want to position it near your patio. Critters are another challenge. Do rabbits or deer abound where you live? If you're not sure, check with your neighbors. The kind of fencing you'll need depends on what animals you're trying to keep out!

Is it possible to reverse the effects of long-term use of inorganic pesticides and chemical-laden fertilizers?

Yes, but you'll have to be patient. It could take three years to bring your soil up to organic standards. You'll have to apply compost and other organic nutrients generously along with a basic organic fertilizer (one containing both micro and macro nutrients from a plant nursery). Make sure you enrich the mix with clean, good-quality

ABOVE: Nolan rabbit-proofed this 10-foot-diameter vegetable garden, designed for a friend in Glencoe, by installing almost-invisible poultry fencing behind flexible, expandable willow fencing.

BELOW: Perfect for salads, sauces or pickling because they're nearly seedless, these red-pear tomatoes "are one of the rarest heirloom varieties," says Nolan.



RIGHT: This prize-worthy zinnia sparks a garden that Nolan designed for a client in Lake Forest, Illinois. Far right: A black-eyed Susan grows tall in a corner of the Nolans' raspberry patch. Below, right: At its blooming peak, this deep-blue morning glory is one of a cluster in various colors growing in a garden Nolan designed for another Lake Forest client.




compost (no chemically treated lawn cuttings) made of leaf mold and manure laced with leaves and straw—that's what we use.

How can gardeners get their own communities more involved in growing organically?

Church groups and schools are great places to start. If you make your interest known, you'll find that more people around you will become interested. It takes networking, talking, getting together and brainstorming. Perhaps there are teachers willing to offer advice. Perhaps there are other families eager to get involved. ➤




On behalf of Green City Market, Nolan plants and maintains the Edibles Garden for the Farm-in-the-Zoo in Chicago's Lincoln Park.



A rustic cedar fence frames a front-yard garden Nolan designed for a Winnetka client. The tall structures will support tomato plants. Wood chips define paths through the garden.

Where can people learn more?

Find someone in your community who has an organic garden. Offer to help work that garden. That's how I learned. Or seek out a master gardener from your nearest U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Office—they exist in all big cities and most big towns. You'll find that these professionals love to help—it's why they're there. If you need to do research, consider checking Pennsylvania's Rodale Institute, which has a fantastic Website and also publishes informative books. Creating and maintaining an organic garden is not as difficult as you may think. It requires commitment, of course, but not that much time. ✨



"This garden started my business," says Nolan, describing the 9x14-foot fenced-in corner of her parents' yard in Winnetka. "The mammoth sunflowers were grown from seed," she says.



A rose arbor rises over the entrance to this corner garden Nolan designed for a Glencoe family. Behind the pickets, mesh hardware cloth has been stapled, and some of it buried, to create a subtle form of rabbit-proofing.