

Cost/Benefit ratio

I've been totaling up the cost/benefit ratio of growing food at home, and while it certainly improves my spirits, it doesn't look good for the pocketbook.

Though many of my neighbors are having to scrape by right now, or have physical limitations, I'm grateful to be able to justify small expenses here and there, and for the nice size yard to play around in.

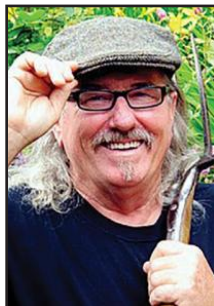
But while shelling and freezing the last of this spring's English peas, I realized I could have bought several cans of better-quality peas from the store a lot cheaper, with a lot less effort, time, and angst.

Yeah, the first few dozen right off the vines were sweet and tasty, like nothing else other than maybe a warm sun-ripened heirloom tomato with juice dripping off my chin. Or a freezer

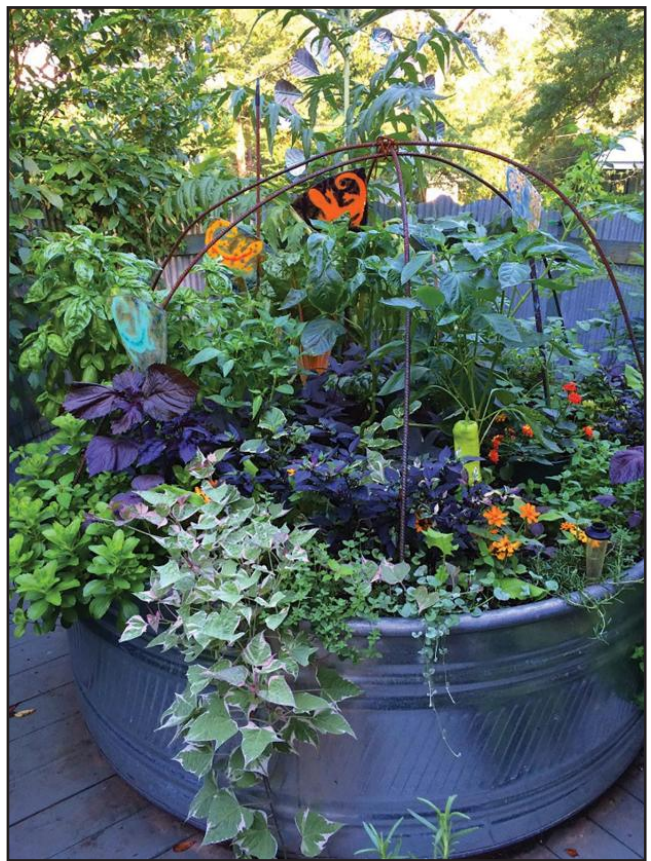
full of highly nutritious peppers that run two bucks apiece in the store.

Who doesn't feel a little smug while cutting flowers for a bouquet, edging a neatly mowed lawn, giving away squash, or snipping even a small spring of oregano for a home-made soup?

Still, I am always looking for ways to cut costs, such as occasionally renting a tiller, powerful pressure washer, or limb chipper as needed rather than owning and having to store and care for an expensive personal one, or making compost rather than buying it. And I use recycled containers for planting and alternate materials for edging beds. Even made my own big bird bath with a three-dollar bag of ready-mix concrete, and my bottle trees are as glorious as any store-bought statuary!



FELDER RUSHING



VEGGIE'S, FLOWERS AND HERBS IN A GALVANIZED TUB

There are several approaches to growing small amounts of food at home, each with pros and cons.

One is to use fruits as regular yard plants; even if the squirrels get most of the harvest they still work as

flowering or textury landscape beauties.

Easiest fruits for me include figs, blueberries, crabapples, self-fertile Orient pears, pomegranate, Japanese persimmon, muscadine grapes (need a fence or single-wire trellis and annual pruning), and even the winter-fruiting eleagnus. Others require too much pruning, cross-pollination, pest control, or you have to know the specific varieties that do well in our mild winter and torrid summers.

I grow lots of edibles in big containers which are expensive to fill and need regular watering but are easy to plant and harvest. And I plant all year in a small raised bed, four feet wide, by constantly replacing what gets harvested (it's true that we can garden non-stop all year in Mississippi).

Because I'm not trying to fill a freezer, I rarely plant much in skinny rows, which invite weeds, pests, and diseases; instead, I mix together pretty, pollinator-attracting flowers, ornamental vegetables that look great even when not producing something to eat, and culi-

nary herbs. Bonus: If something dies or gets harvested, who can tell? Just pull up the old, stick something else in the hole, and move on. All year, a little at a time.

By the way, lasagna gardening - simply covering grass with layers of non-slick cardboard, leaves, grass clippings, a little fertilizer, and bark mulch - creates an almost instant garden, without a tiller. Even in clay soil.

But back to the peas. I won't plant that many again, just enough to have a few little happy munches. No more corn, beans, carrots, potatoes, and other stuff I can buy cheaper. From now on I'm getting the most out of my little spaces by sticking with higher-yield stuff that is more nutritious, or produces more over a longer period. Peppers, tomatoes, okra, sweet potatoes, and culinary herbs are my go-to small-space edibles.

Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.

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