

More Americans grew vegetables last year

COLUMBUS, OHIO - Edibles such as vegetables, herbs and fruits are staging a comeback in U.S. gardens that's setting modern-day records.

The number of U.S. households growing food crops increased 10 percent between 2007 and 2008, according to the National Gardening Association. It registered close to a 20 percent jump in 2009, totaling more than 43 million homes or 37-plus percent of all U.S. Census-estimated households.

"The top reason for growing edibles at home is always that they taste better. But, three other reasons are also strong contenders now: to save money, to get better quality produce and to have food they know is safe. Some of the latter, of course, may partly reflect the nation's current 'green' movement," said Jake Weber, horticulturist with Kansas State University Research and Extension.

Today's expansions in traditional gardening activities mean some gardeners are coming back to or expanding their previous food-growing efforts. Millions, however, are novices when it comes to edibles; so, Weber is suggesting they consider the following before spring 2010 arrives:

- Have you matched the space available with the crops you'd like to raise? You can grow edibles in patio containers, amid landscape perennials and ornamentals, and/or in a normal or raised garden bed. You can use them to replace part of a lawn. Crops such as lettuce and radishes need fairly little space. Vining crops such as winter squash and watermelon need quite a bit of room.

- Does your space have at least 8-inch-deep soil that's suitable for growing vegetables? Have you tested it for nutrients and pH? Do you still need to cultivate the soil, to make it "workable" for planting season?

- Does the soil drain well? Soil that holds moisture too long can be a fatal problem for plants, as can soil that lets water drain straight through. Incorporating organic matter (e.g., peat moss, compost) can improve health-promoting, water-handling ability.

- Does the site receive at least 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight daily? Often that means choosing a location away from the shade of tall buildings and trees.

- Is the site near a convenient water source, in case the weather doesn't provide enough



VERA SLOAN/Colby Free Press

Jo Cheney and husband Duane grew spinach, along with many other vegetables, in their greenhouse last year. The National Gardening Association said there has been a 20 percent increase in the number of households with vegetable gardens in 2009.

rain?

- Have you checked with your nearest Extension office to find which varieties perform best where you live? You can ask about soil testing, planting schedules and general gardening there, too.

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