

Not Your GARDEN VARIETY VEGETABLE GARDEN



by Maxine Paetro

photographs by Jennifer May

It's August 10th and I'm holding the first tomato from my vegetable garden. It is two inches in diameter with some nice yellow stripes radiating out from under its small green hat. It's a cute tomato, but not a meal, and this is my entire harvest so far this year.

Actually, I'm not disappointed.

So, let me start at the beginning.

Fifteen years ago I determined that any gardener with room for a vegetable garden should grow their own fresh vegetables. Not a half-way measures kind of a girl, I bought a greenhouse kit and had a fertile, sunny, fifty-foot square plot tilled up. Then, I hired a carpenter who built raised beds and a white, colonial-style fence to enclose my new garden.

I asked my friend, Kevin, at the Bottle Shoppe to find a unique tool shed for me and he did — a two-seater outhouse from a long-closed, all-girls college. I painted this little privy hunter green and repurposed it as a cool place for tools.

I centered the tool shed at the top of one main path, then bisected that path with

another. I designated the beds to the right for herbs, the beds to the left for vegetables, and then I went shopping.

I chose herbs that had old-timey names and medicinal uses: feverfew, lemon balm, achillea, comfrey, a tall fuzzy-leaved marshmallow, and basil, of course. I loaded my car with seedlings; flats of tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuces, and annual flowers from the local nursery and planted them on the other side of the central path.

I found old buggy benches at my junk dealer's place, set them on milkcrates, and placed them on the cross-paths. Signage sprung up in the form of my hand-lettered rusty spades and hoes; peas, peppers, tomatoes.

I was pleased with my first-class, raised-bed vegetable garden -- and then the predation began.

Springy, flea-like bugs descended on the broccoli and arugula. Slugs slimed the tomatoes. Rabbits and woodchucks tucked into the leafy greens and raccoons harvested the corn.

The next year, I fought back with beer-filled catfood tins to trap the slugs, collars around the tomatoes to protect against cutworms, blood meal to keep out the mammals, organic sprays of soap and pepper to ward off bad bugs — tiring work for a handful of beans.

One year I placed rows of Del Monte canned goods in the raised beds so that my visitors would know that this, indeed, was a vegetable garden.

At the end of one of those early years, there was an end-of-season sale at a local nursery: peonies, \$3.95 each. I dropped a hundred bucks and took twenty-five of them home, setting them in a military line inside the garden fence.

I bought daisy-like echinacea in both mauve and white, and interspersed them with bright blue spikes of hyssop. The cats requested fresh catnip, so I planted catnip seeds where peppers used to grow.

I acquired a liking for old metal bits and pieces to use as stakes and signs, and added an old brass propeller painted to match the

lilacs. Iron scrolls guided hoses and crown-like iron hoops supported wayward herbs.

In time, peonies Sarah Bernhard and Buckeye Belle nuzzled up to the painted fence and feverfew dotted the air above them. Extra plants from the rose border took up temporary residence in the vegetable garden – and stayed. A tall copper sprinkler with a glass ball whirled, sending spirals of water over my newly named “cutting garden,” and I found that it was good.

But I needed something special to complete the scene. The makings of a sculpture were in my basement. It came in three pieces; an old-fashioned ice cream chair with no seat, an antiques mechanical typewriter and a typing table.

I painted these findings marine blue, heliotrope and chartreuse respectively, and hauled them up to the former vegetable garden, where I arranged a typing tableau under a plum tree. A ceramic bowl went into the chair’s empty seat and I filled it with hanging lobelia. I called my flowering centerpiece “homage to a ghost writer,” because that had been my occupation for many years.

Will I ever grow vegetables again? I could. I have more garden experience these days and I know that nothing beats fresh vegetables harvested from one’s own soil.

But for now, each Spring, I stake marshmallows and peonies, pot lobelias in the ice cream chair and plant four tomato plants for old time’s sake in a raised bed of their own.

I gather lavish bouquets from my cutting garden – and buy my produce at Freshtown.

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Maxine Paetro. Photo by J. May

Maxine Paetro co-writes with author, James Patterson. Their two recent collaborations, “8th Confession” and “Swimsuit” are both NY Times #1 best-sellers. See more of her Amenia garden, Broccoli Hall, at BroccoliHall.com.

Photographer Jennifer May’s work has appeared in the New York Times, Gourmet, People, and many other publications. She is currently working on two book projects to be published in 2010: “River of Words: Portraits of Hudson Valley Writers”; and a book of portraits of women for Stewart, Tabori & Chang. See more of her work at jennifermay.com.



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