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HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

## Growing value of green veggies

Cancer alliance works to promote healthier diet through local garden

By Rosa Salter Rodriguez  
The Journal Gazette



Ephraim Smiley shows new gardeners at Angel Garden community garden how green beans are picked.



Segmet Pinckney, 10, tills between the green beans at Angel Garden community garden. The till was made from an old bicycle by Smiley, a master gardener. The gardens are used to grow vegetables in an effort to encourage community members to eat more veggies.



Photos by Cathie Rowand/The Journal Gazette

From right, Segmet Pinckney, 10, Nikita Pinckney, 9, Qualon Royal, 10, and Jalon Jordon, 10, pick green beans at Angel Garden community garden.

Evelyn Frierson knows she can talk about eating more green beans until she's blue in the face, but that doesn't mean anyone in her audience will actually eat more green beans.

But the Fort Wayne cancer educator hopes that if people see fresh green beans – and they're free, if you put in a little time picking, weeding or planting them – those green beans will become irresistible.

That's the premise behind rows of green beans that stretch nearly as long as a football field in a huge vegetable garden tucked away off Tillman Road on the city's south side.

Packed with okra, tomatoes, green peppers, crowder peas, purple-hull peas, collard greens and cabbage with a side plot of watermelon vines, the garden is part of an initiative by the Fort Wayne African-American Cancer Alliance. Its aim is to get local minorities to eat a healthier diet, says Frierson, cancer alliance executive director.

Government authorities have long linked maladies such as colon cancer with poor diet, and for some time, they've been urging people to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, she says. But that advice often falls short of getting people to change their eating habits, especially when it comes to fresh produce.

"The biggest reason is the cost. ... It can be cost-prohibitive for low-income families to buy fresh," she says, noting it's not uncommon for a single supermarket pepper to cost \$2 and for fresh tomatoes to sell for more than \$3 a pound.

"To keep the cost down, I tell people to buy frozen or canned, and if they want fresh, I urge people to buy in season. But it's still hard," she says.

Renetta Williams, executive director of HealthVisions Fort Wayne, another garden sponsor, says eating habits go deep.

"People have been conditioned over generations to eat poorly. We've lost the tradition of gardening, and we've become a busy society, and we think we don't have time to cook. So we've turned to the fast food and the convenience of packaged food and the microwave," she says.

"But when you think of the content of what you're getting, it's high in fat, high in calories, high in cholesterol, high in salt and low in fiber – and it's killing us."

But there's evidence that trend might be turning around on this one-acre patch of green, as master gardener Ephraim Smiley of Fort Wayne straddles a row of green-bean plants to show about a half-dozen youngsters how to snap the long, skinny veggies off their stems.

The kids, some of whom had helped plant the beans in early June, had brought plastic bags for their harvest. In two hours, they brought in six pounds of beans, maybe more, Smiley says, adding that plenty more beans are on the way.

Kids have been involved in what alliance members call the Angel Garden all along the way, with some helping break up the ground, using unusual tillers designed by Smiley from old bicycles, and others planting or weeding.

The kids come from the Fort Wayne Community Fishing Club, the Friends of Bethany youth-mentoring program in Fort

Wayne and youth groups of Fort Wayne's Come As You Are Community Church at 7910 S. Anthony Blvd. Its pastor, Anthony Payton, owns the garden site, and several families at the church are participating in the project.

At 55, Smiley soaked up some of his gardening knowledge from observing his grandparents, who were sharecroppers in Alabama. He also has read widely about organic methods and talked extensively with other gardeners since deciding in the early 1970s that he needed a hobby "that would pay off" if he was going to support his family.

"So I moved from fixing up old cars into gardening," he says. "I traded a 1964 Chevy Super Sport, and this is a true story, for a garden tiller, and I tilled up half my backyard, and we would haul honey-manure. I think the neighbors thought I was crazy.

"And then one day I found a praying mantis and a toad in my garden, and I thought, 'Hmm, I must be doing something right, if these creatures moved in.' "

For several years, Smiley ran an organic garden service, and he still uses organic methods. The garden's fertilizer is provided by "zoo-do," composed straw bedding from the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo. The only pesticides employed are the insecticidal soap Neem and *Bacillus thuringiensis*, bacteria that make life difficult for beetles.

"We don't want to kill off all the insects, just keep some under control," he says.

Smiley also uses "a trick developed by George Washington Carver," rotating legume crops such as cowpeas that fix nitrogen in the soil with other crops that need it.

He enjoys teaching tricks like that to the children who help in the garden, though, he says, "I try not to get too scientific."

Smiley hooked up with the cancer alliance garden after getting involved with community gardens about three years ago through Fort Wayne's parks department.

He calls this garden, his largest community garden yet, a "freezer garden," because nearly everything in it can be frozen or otherwise preserved for future use.

"I look at it like a bank account," he said, noting that participating families can expect 20 quarts of beans for freezing. "They can put them in their freezer, and in February, they can take them out and have fresh food."

Smiley isn't sure why more people don't garden at home, but he says if they did, they'd be in better shape. He says he's lost 15 pounds so far this season, from the bending and planting and tilling and weeding, and he says he looks at the plot as "an exercise field."

He says he's not one to walk around a park, but he'll "come out here and push the plow along these rows," he says. "I call it agri-cize."

And, he says, there's an additional feeling of well-being from eating vegetables you've grown yourself.

This year, the cancer alliance has expanded the number of its community gardens by two to five, with small plots at several senior citizens' housing sites.

Those gardens are at True Love Manor on South Hanna Street, Phoenix Manor at Creighton Avenue and Bowser Street, Memorial Park Estates on Maumee Street and a Genesis Outreach transitional housing site for women and men recovering from substance abuse.

With the gardens at the senior citizen residences, child volunteers are also providing some of the labor. Older residents aren't always physically able to do all of the garden tasks, Frierson says.

But residents are interested in the produce, she says.

"One lady wasn't really able to help, but she wanted her green onions, and she was able to plant a few," she says.

Frierson says the alliance is seeking donations for a chest freezer or a freeze-and-seal machine so produce can be preserved. The alliance is also selling cookbooks with recipes for using vegetables. The books are \$10 each, and the money will help buy preserving supplies.

Besides the cost of fresh produce, Frierson says, lack of knowledge about how to prepare it is another barrier to increased vegetable consumption.

"It's not that people don't like the taste (of vegetables) so much as they don't know how to cook them," she says. "So we have recipes."

### **Nutty Green Beans**

1 pound green beans, trimmed

3 tablespoons light olive oil

1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

4 tablespoons walnuts or pecans, coarsely chopped

Lemon wedges

1. In large non-stick skillet, bring an inch of water to a boil.
2. Add beans and cook uncovered for 5 minutes or until beans are crisp-tender.
3. Drain; place beans on serving platter and keep warm.
4. Add olive oil, vinegar and pepper to skillet. When warmed, stir in nuts (Note: To toast nuts, put in dry non-stick skillet on medium heat and shake or turn often for 3 minutes until slightly browned.)
5. Drizzle sauce over beans and garnish with lemon wedges. Makes 4 servings.

### **Fresh Tomato, Basil and Garlic Sauce Over Pasta**

2 pounds ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 red onion, finely chopped

3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

1 oregano sprig

Pinch chili flakes, if desired

1 teaspoon sugar

1 pound angel hair pasta

1/4 -cup grated Parmesan cheese

1/4 -cup fresh basil, sliced into strips

1. Heat a large saute pan or skillet over medium-high heat.

2. Add olive oil and heat.
3. Add onions and garlic and saute for 2 minutes. Add thyme, oregano and chili flakes and sauté until garlic turns golden brown.
4. Add tomatoes and sugar. Stir.
5. Cover and lower heat until mixture is fairly dry, about 15 minutes.
6. Cook pasta in boiling salted water. Drain, add to sauce, add cheese and basil. Pass additional cheese as a topping for the dish. Makes 4 servings.

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***Digging deeper******So, what exactly can you do with lots of green beans or fresh tomatoes?***

*"Well, here are a couple of recipes from our cookbook. I can personally say the green bean one is very good – I've made it and it, had just the right flavors and a good crunch, and I got compliments on it. Mmmm mmm!"*

*– Renetta Williams*

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*How Does Your Garden Grow? will highlight a different garden twice a month. Contact Rosa Salter Rodriguez at [rsalter@jg.net](mailto:rsalter@jg.net) or 461-8553 to suggest a garden.*