Roger Doiron: Kitchen Gardening for a Better Future
by Mary Yee

In this presidential election year, the political candidates have been busy campaigning on myriad issues of importance to the American people. One issue that Roger Doiron would like them to address hasn’t made it into anyone’s speeches: He would like the next president to turn the White House lawn into the country’s most high-profile food garden. This idea, which he recently posted on a politically-oriented website, has received much favorable reader response, but no bite yet from politicians. A self-described optimist, Doiron remains hopeful.

Politics and gardening are rarely joined in conversation, but Doiron, a longtime environmental advocate and founder of Kitchen Gardeners International (KGI), a non-profit web-based community for promoting home food gardening, believes that backyard food production has positive implications beyond fresher, healthier meals—it’s a way to save money and take care of the planet. He says last year, at his home in Scarborough, Maine, he turned $85 worth of vegetable seeds into half a year’s supply of organic produce for his family of five—and no fossil fuel was used to transport this food to the table.

According to Doiron, not enough Americans actively participate in the food process, and he is on a mission to change that. Mary Yee, managing editor and art director for The American Gardener, talks to Doiron about the power of the home garden to help solve global problems and ways everyone can participate in this movement.

Mary Yee: Since you launched KGI in late 2003, it’s grown into a network of 6,000 gardeners from 100 countries. What does this tell you about the level of interest in food gardening today?

Roger Doiron: Well, clearly, that it’s growing and expanding from its original core of gardening enthusiasts into a larger social movement. It’s fun seeing the diversity of people who are taking up kitchen gardening—young people fresh out of college who see it as a most environmentally responsible form of food production, parents who are concerned about what their young children are eating, seniors who see it as a way of staying physically active, city dwellers who are looking to connect with the earth and their community members.

What inspired you to found KGI?

The idea began when I was living in Belgium, where I worked for 10 years for a global environmental group. There I saw people making the connection between food and the environment, and I felt there was a need for a new group that would encourage people to make this connection in as direct and personal a way as possible. What better way than through the growing and preparing some of one’s own food?

What differences do you see between the European and American approaches to food and gardening?

I think we’ve lost touch with the culture of food. In the U.S., we tend to think of food as a product, but in Europe, people see food as a process. Many Americans in recent generations have asked themselves, “If I can get my food in other ways, why should I garden?” Europeans, however, ask, “If I can have the freshest, tastiest, and most economical foods by growing some of them myself, why do anything else?”

There are a lot of forces that have contributed to the decline of home gardening in the U.S., but the convenience factor is one of the most important. We’re rich in money and “stuff” but poor in time and therefore always looking for shortcuts.

You’ve offered two ideas for helping get more Americans involved in food gardening: The “Eat the View” proposal calls for the White House lawn to be turned into a self-sustaining vegetable garden. You also suggest that tax breaks
be given to people who grow their own food. What’s behind these ideas? As I wrote when I posted the idea of planting a food garden on the White House lawn, the White House is “America’s House” and should set an example.

The idea of a tax break for gardeners originated from my own annual income tax filing ritual. Since I work from home, I can claim a tax credit for the amount of space I use for income generation. This got me thinking: Why shouldn’t we also get a tax break for the part of our lawns used for food generation? The government offers tax credits to people for putting solar panels on their houses and hybrid vehicles in their garages, so why not offer incentives for growing our own food?

There has been great support for both ideas in the gardening community. The more people there are pushing for them, the more politicians will need to listen.

You’ve written about home gardening as a solution to the problem of rising oil prices and our dependence on it. Could you explain the connection between oil and our food?

The short answer is that in our current highly-industrialized food system, it takes 10 calories of fossil fuel energy—in the forms of gas and oil-derived fertilizers and pesticides—to produce 1 calorie of food energy.

Many reputable geologists feel that we’re fast approaching “peak oil”—that point in time when we’ve pumped out more oil than what remains in the earth. Although it’s only possible to know that with certainty in retrospect, rising global oil prices suggest that demand is outstripping supply—and have been taking food prices with them.

All of our oil won’t suddenly run out, of course, but the stuff that’s cheap and easy to get will, and we need to be planning for what comes after oil is depleted. I see organic gardens playing a huge role in feeding a hungry, post-oil world.

KGI has designated the fourth Sunday each August (August 24 this year) as Kitchen Garden Day. What do you suggest people do that day?

Creating a culture of gardens and gardeners requires that we bring people together at the local level to teach one another. In the past, people learned to grow and cook foods primarily through family members, but with gardening’s decline over the past 50 years, educational structure has been weakened. Kitchen Garden Day is meant to offer such an educational opportunity.

We leave it up to our supporters to decide how they want to recognize the day.

The tradition in my neighborhood is to organize a walking tour of three to four gardens—including a school garden—followed by a community potluck meal.

What advice do you have for novice gardeners who would like to begin a food garden?

Start small, grow what you enjoy, and build on your successes. I also recommend finding a garden mentor in your community, but if that’s not possible, there are lots of good home garden books for guides.

How can people who don’t have room to garden get involved in the local food movement?

Fortunately, there are more and more options. I was in New York City last year for a garden celebration and was excited to hear New Yorkers tell me about their community, rooftop, and balcony gardens. It’s amazing to see how much food can be produced in a little space, even in containers.

For people with no space at all, farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture farms—CSAs—offer excellent opportunities for getting locally grown food.

One of the oft-heard criticisms of food gardens in suburbia is that they don’t look good. Are aesthetics important? Aesthetics matter a great deal. A garden, whether it’s ornamental, edible, or a mixture of the two, should be an inviting space where you want to linger. In our garden, we’ve got an appealing mix of mature trees, shrubs, flower beds, and beds for edibles, including a brand new one smack dab in the middle of our front lawn. Since putting it in, we’ve had nothing but praise from our neighbors, including from one person who asked if we could help her do the same thing in her yard.

Suburbia is changing, and so is the suburban aesthetic. In the future, beauty and utility won’t be seen as mutually exclusive gardening goals, but as part of the same continuum.

Mary Yee is managing editor and art director of The American Gardener.