

Gardening During Covid –
A Beginner's Foray into Backyard Gardening During the Pandemic
and Some Tips to Inspire Other Newbies
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When we returned in March 2019 from our winter home in Arizona, prompted by Trudeau's call to return, and our cancelled travel insurance, I quickly realized that this summer would provide a perfect opportunity to create in the garden. I had always wanted to have a vegetable garden like my grandfather had. I wouldn't own the shotgun to fight off thieving groundhogs, but I could try to create that warmed in the sun home grown flavor of fresh from the garden zucchinis, tomatoes and beans. I will also admit that the first very anxious month of Covid did also spur me on to secure some fresh greens of my own. I am not a gardener. I usually have experts come and offer me their words of wisdom. I have never been successful at growing my own vegetables before. So it was very much a waltz in the dark.

Locate a raised bed kit that has varmint protection

I knew about groundhogs – not that I have ever seen any in Oakville – but I had heard the stories of loss from people who had patiently shepherded their veggies to ripe maturity only to have them nabbed in their prime by varmints. Rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, birds, opossums, skunks, rarely a raccoon, foxes and coyotes we did have in Oakville with many residing in our backyard. So...I realized we needed some gardening plots that had protection. I also needed some that I could find online. I found some gorgeous cedar raised bed kits with square mesh framed covers and hinged sides made in BC, online at Costco, and placed my order nabbing the last ones available. There was a bit of a rush on gardening materials in late March! I didn't even know if my order would be fulfilled



as Costco did not send me any ship dates for weeks and they could not be reached because their system, as many others were, was swamped. I knew the odds were better if it was from a Canadian source. International orders for products on Amazon were being taken but were not being delivered. So I had faith and patiently waited. The kits arrived at the beginning of May.

If possible, nab some good help and go organic!

Another important part of the raised bed initiative was the willing participation of my husband. He agreed to be the kit assembler and he worked very hard to level the ground behind our garage, the sunniest part of our tree shrouded garden, and assemble the kits. They were gorgeous and the smell of fresh cedar was divine. We lined the sides and bottom of the beds with landscape fabric. I decided against using sheets of polypropylene plastic in the interests of reducing leaching from the plastic but perhaps the landscape fabric is not organic either – it seemed less polluting anyway. I did have the goal to grow organic veggies if I was to grow them. The soil I used was organic vegetable soil from a company that delivered it in a large pile onto our driveway. Again the schlepping was done by my assistant.

Worm casings – a natural fertilizer

I googled vegetable gardening as one does when one is trying to quickly learn a whole new skill. I came upon a video by Mark Cullen using worm casings as a natural fertilizer. I contacted a member of GASP who had mentioned she was planting a vegetable garden and she also mentioned worm casings as a fertilizer, so I was sold. At first, I thought it was worm castings – whatever that would be – but it's worm casings. Don't ask. I didn't. They just sounded very fertile and organic. So I went on the hunt. Of course, everyone by this time was sold out of worm casings – hard to imagine what gets popular during a pandemic. And one thinks buying investment stocks is challenging. I enlisted the engineering education of hubby and calculated the volume of worm casings/dirt ratio for the container garden and decided I needed two bags. I found two bags at the Home Hardware in Acton. Not exactly close to Oakville and they needed to be picked up. Again, it was still Covid anxiety time, so trusty hubby stood in a loooong line in Acton, socially distanced except by a crowded corner, and waited to get to the store door to claim our prepaid bags. There was no mask wearing at this time. Carrying them to the car was not easy as he had to bend over awkwardly to minimize touching the

heavy bags and arrived at the car with a rather red face. I am very lucky to have an assistant.

Hardening off your seedlings

During the time it took to take delivery of the kits, I started researching vegetables. I must say that my research was not very scientific. I know that growers are very knowledgeable about zones, soil and light conditions, but I did not have the time, or the patience, I must admit, for that. It was easier for me to wing it. So again, I went to Dr. Google, PhD and found a company outside Sarnia that delivered organic seedlings. How great to get a seedling! How great to get a seedling grown locally in Ontario – of course getting them into Canada from the states was impossible. The company, Plantables, was operating on a skeleton crew, as most were at that time, but they returned my call and answered my questions on the different types of tomato seedlings and when to plant. The seedlings would be posted - yes delivered via the mail - to me just before the May long weekend, and I needed to harden them off before planting, but then they would be good to go. Hardening them off means leaving them outside in dappled shade for a few hours for a few days for the wee things to get used to their new environment. I placed my order quickly because I did not know how many seedlings would remain available. I ordered three types of tomato, strawberry, cucumber, kale, beans, zucchini and lettuce. I was told to resist the great temptation to plant before the May long weekend to guarantee frost free night temperatures – this is Canada eh.

The seedlings did arrive exactly when promised but they were hand delivered to my door from Sarnia at no extra cost. Just a call to tell me that someone would leave them at my door the next day. They arrived like little foundlings all wrapped up and ready for their new home.

The seed challenge

Meanwhile back at the ranch, I also decided to try growing from seed. I had heard that this could be a challenging task. I ordered seeds from an organic seed company, The Incredible Seed Company, in Nova Scotia – just before the mass killing there. Sorry to interject that, but it was a tragic part of that time, and it hit me that I ordered those seeds from the very community that was shattered by the unthinkable during the unthinkable pandemic. Seeds for life when life was shattered...It was such a difficult time.

The planting the seed challenge

The seeds, Heirloom Heritage Open Pollinated Seeds, I started from scratch in my kitchen window in trays from Lee Valley in Burlington. Everyone who is a gardener knows about Lee Valley. So now that I am a gardener, I know about Lee Valley. However, by the time I got around to learning about Lee Valley, most of their inventory was gone. No tomato cages, no water delivery systems, etc. but a few planting trays and coir husk pots - biodegradable coconut husk fibre pots - remained so we ordered them and picked them up. The customer service person nicely brought everything to our car and placed the order in the trunk. I followed the instructions for planting carefully but probably miserably as it's not the easiest task to plant $\frac{1}{4}$ " below the surface for some and $\frac{3}{4}$ " below the surface for other small stick-to-the-finger seeds. When some sprouted along the side of the pot and some didn't sprout at all, I realized that it required a delicacy that I do not possess. And how hard should I tap down the dirt on top? Was I smothering them? And how much to water? I read about root rot. So I obsessively tested the soil surface for dryness, watered and then removed water from the bottom of the tray regularly. And moved the seedlings from window to window to maximize the sun exposure. Probably way too obsessive but what else was one to do during Covid and our stay in place orders.

I planted two kinds of squash, tomato (only for the ambitious), kale, cucumber and hot pepper seeds. I was able to sprout all of the kinds I planted. So success. I used the dirt we ordered with a pinch of worm casings. Others were baking bread – I was cooking seeds.

A short on vegetable seedlings

My assistant created another framed veggie plot for me with two by fours on a bare patch in our lawn. So the shape is a bit odd – an irregular diamond shape but it gets enough sun. I had discovered by talking to real gardeners that the tomato plants, squash and zucchini would soon take over my raised containers so I needed to expand. I also bought a large started tomato plant from Bulow's and some started lettuces. I thought this would spread the risk of a crop failure and I wouldn't have to wait until September to eat. At that time, mid May, there was a run on vegetable plants. My art group compared notes during our zoom meeting and we discovered that many of us were driving the streets of Oakville in the early hours looking for vegetables and herb plants. People were even sending emails as to where the latest catch was.

Vegetables and herbs were being shorted at nurseries – again another high demand stock worth investing in. So when I saw the lettuce and tomato plants sitting there at Bulow's, I snagged them quickly – briefly overcoming any fear about contracting Covid.

Kitchen ledge lettuce garden

One of my art group buddies had showed us her kitchen ledge lettuce garden, so I planted my lettuces in a large salad bowl and sat them in the window. No drainage but lettuce likes moisture so they thrived. And it gave me another jumpstart on the garden.

Vegetables have friends and unlikes

The May long weekend finally arrived. I had hardened my seedlings off – a very difficult task of putting the poor things out and seeing them wilt a bit and wondering how long the sun stays dappled in that location. The same with my precious sprouted seeds. You do become attached. I used portable TV trays to move the trays about the deck trying to keep just the right amount of shade not to kill them off. I also had to keep them elevated to avoid the dog who loves the feel of tender shoots on his legs as he lifts one. I am not that organic. You do invent as you go along. One of my art friends generously forwarded her husband's carefully crafted planting plan so that I could learn what veggies like each other. Who knew but veggies definitely have friends and unlikes. Pole beans hate beets, onions don't like beans, tomatoes can crowd out bush beans, carrots like onions, tomatoes like basil – its complicated. Also there are moon planting guides but I didn't go there.

I planted the big started MF tomato plant first in the center of the ground plot, two seedling zucchini plants beside it, seedling tomato plants in three corners, the hot pepper plants between the tomatoes, the bush bean seeds along one side and some pole bean seeds in one corner. The beans were placed along the side receiving more shade as beans don't mind some shade. I surrounded the plot with chicken wire, more to keep the varmint dog out than anything else. In the corners I put some green spiral poles from Lee Valley with the hope that they could provide support for the tomato or bean plants. They never did and I had to add some other recycled metal stakes from my daughter's old IKEA bedframe. I ended up buying some peony frames to use on my beans after seeing some frames in a friend's garden.

Take a seed, good soil, sun, water and voila...you have food

Within one raised bed I planted bush bean seedlings, pole bean seeds, lettuce seedlings, my kitchen ledge lettuces, lettuce seeds, spinach seeds, red and yellow Swiss chard seeds and kale seedlings. This bed receives more shade and ended up being the perfect location for lettuces and chard. The bush bean seedlings yielded beans very early but became over crowded by the pole beans eventually. The young plants and seeds had to be watered gently so I had a few “discussions” with my assistant and finally we agreed on a suitable watering device. Be aware that a hose left out in the hot sun will have scorching water temperatures when first run. It was very exciting to see how quickly the lettuce leaves, spinach and Swiss chard seeds sprouted and grew. Magic. Eternal nature. How amazing! Take a seed, good soil, sun, water and voila...you have food. At a time when we were all suffering from the oppression of Covid upon our world, this was renewal.



Garden lids were only helpful at the start of the growing process

Within the other raised bed, I planted my strawberry seedlings, cherry tomato seedlings, carrot seeds, beets seeds, onion seedlings and tomato seedlings.



The tomato seedlings were a mistake in that bed and had to be removed to the larger ground plot. The cherry tomato eventually needed tying to the raised lid of the raised container preventing me from closing the lid. Same with the beans. So the lids were only useful at the very start of the growing process which may have prevented squirrels from nipping off the tender bean shoots which they

are prone to do. Once the flowers came, I realized that any plant that requires pollination required the lid to be raised. Maybe pollinators could go through

the mesh but I wasn't sure. So plants that don't need pollination for harvest and don't grow too tall like lettuce, chard, spinach and kale are best with the lid covers.

I ordered a white gauzy gardening fabric from China but it never arrived. I had thought I would need it to prevent pests but again it also prevents pollination so what to do? Upon the advice of a gardener friend, I put small squares of gauze over my kale to prevent eggs being laid on it by white moths and that worked. I used the gauze, as it was hard to find, from a cut up gauze turkey bag that I had for cooking. For my carrot seeds, the seed packet said that they should be kept moist so I cut up a plastic garbage bag and placed it over the seeds and anchored it down with a piece of cedar. I checked them regularly and kept them watered. Once they were about ½" high I removed the cover.



Thin mercilessly

Another gardener friend (it's a whole new world of connecting) gave me some more tips. I was to mercilessly thin all of my sprouts. Again this was hard. I probably did not thin as much as I should have. The spinach became overgrown and thin and ended up being a short-lived crop. The baby spinach was good but I pulled out the early gone to seed plant in June. I did manage to thin the carrots and beets and was glad I did. I figured that the root veggies did indeed need some space to form.

Bolting – another word with a new meaning

I was also tipped off to take off the seeds that happen on lettuces once the weather gets hot. This is called "bolting" in the gardening world – another foreign lexicon. The weather was very hot so bolting happened early with the spinach and I couldn't save it. I was told to take the bottom leaves off the lettuce and to keep doing that because it invigorates them. I did this willingly

because we could then start eating fresh organic straight from the garden salads full of many kinds of lettuces and leafy greens – mesclun, leaf, butterhead, frisee, chard, baby spinach! Yum. I cut off several strands of the green stalks above the red onions and snipped leaves of oregano and basil to complete the salad.

Keep the cutworm away

Another tip from my expert gardener friend was to place a nail along the stalk of each tomato plant leaving about one inch above the ground to prevent a cutworm from killing the stalk. I did this and the tomato plants are still standing. The seed grown tomato plants may not have enough time to grow big enough to produce tomatoes so growing tomatoes from seed in our Canadian climate may not work. I ended up protecting those plants and some of my ground level bean plants with plastic food containers placed over the seedling with a hole cut in the top. This worked very well. I did not protect the hot pepper plants and they just mysteriously disappeared one day. You could still see the stalk but the plant was gone. Ha – my first fatality. Who would have thought the hot pepper plant would be vulnerable?

Cucumber murder and monster zucchinis

Also my cucumber plants were murdered or eaten by some well deserving varmint or pest. Maybe I should plant extras for them and share the wealth? Have to work on that consciousness raising. I did consent to sharing my carrot stalks with some black swallowtail caterpillars after I googled the fluorescent beauties and realized that they are the last stage before the gorgeous swallowtail. I hope my carrots survive.



My zucchinis grew into monsters and I was warned, so when it came time to plant my squashes grown from seed, I put them in mounds along the fence at the side of the house. I protected the tender seedlings with plastic containers. The squashes won't be ready for harvest until fall but they do produce amazing flowers. The zucchini flowers are edible but I left them and now we have MANY zucchinis growing. A large zucchini is easy to grow and could feed a family of four for a week, maybe.

You can go away if you can still water

One last thing, watering. I mentioned that sprouts need tender sprays and light consistent watering. After that stage, I was concerned about their watering because I was going to be away up north for a while visiting my home town, Deep River. (Deep River incidentally has embraced the idea of vegetable gardens for lawns – what a concept! Strawberry fields forever!) While I was away, my daughter kindly volunteered to take over the resident salad cropping (with its incumbent perks) and fallen over after windstorm tomato plant care (garden ties from Lee Valley to the rescue or old pantyhose whatever works), but I needed a regular water source. The easy solution was to turn on the in ground sprinkler system and just see how well it could reach the raised containers and the plots. It worked. Initially it was a bit too much for the young beet leaves so I protected them with some pieces of wood, and everything managed really well. So you can have a veggie garden and go away for a bit.

A source of renewal in the time of Covid

My garden has been a revelation. A source of renewal in the time of Covid. Aside from the bountiful harvest of lettuce, chard, baby spinach and kale, the tomatoes are ripening, the beans are forming, the onions, carrots and beets



are thriving, the squash is slowly developing, the zucchini is about to take over the world and I might get a strawberry or two. It's proof that anyone with an able assistant can do it. If you don't have an assistant, you can probably find one. If you can't find one, you can still have a garden as Lee Valley has portable garden containers that don't need assembly. You can

also plant in pots. It is exciting to see seeds sprout, shepherd them to maturity and then enjoy the organic bounty at your back door. It brings you face to face with where your food comes from and the look and life cycle of the things you pick up unthinkingly at the grocery store. It's very achievable. It's organic. And it's delicious.

Heartfelt thanks for all the gardening advice I received. There is a wealth of knowledge and a whole subculture out there playing in the dirt.

To anyone considering a veggie garden this year, there is plenty of time to get going plus it's much easier now to get supplies.

Happy Harvesting Everyone