

Is it worth it to mind your peas & cukes?

What is a vegetable garden worth these days? It depends on whom you ask and why he/she gardens.

Some people garden simply because they enjoy making plants grow. Others like the convenience of having fresh vegetables for the picking right outside their door. Still others like the challenge of turning a handful of seeds into food in spite of pests and weather. It's hard to put a dollar value on these.

Some people garden to save money on food or to attain a degree of self-sufficiency.

According to Lee Taylor, Extension horticulture specialist at Michigan State University, whether these people actually do save money by gardening depends largely on whether they figure they're donating the time they spend working on it.

"If you figure it's costing you even minimum wage for every hour you spend planning, planting and caring for the garden, profits disappear quickly," he said.

Gardening may also involve an opportunity cost, he said. If you could be doing something else with your time, giving up doing it in favor of gardening increases the cost of the garden.

On the other hand, if you have spare time, gardening can be a productive way to spend it.

If YOU'RE interested in maximizing the dollar-value of your garden, Taylor recommends planting and preserving the crops that bring high prices in the off-season. These include asparagus, edible-podded peas, tomatoes, peppers, onions and broccoli.

If your food preservation skills and equipment are limited, you could concentrate on vegetables that store well without fancy accommodations. These include onions, potatoes, winter squash, cabbage and root crops such as carrots and beets. If you already have a freezer, you can put it to good use by filling it with garden produce. Peas, snap beans, broccoli, cooked and pureed winter squash, peppers, asparagus, corn and tomatoes freeze well.

Another strategy for increasing the value of our garden is to plant crops that tend to produce a lot in a small space. These include snap beans (bush or pole varieties), summer squash, tomatoes, leaf lettuce, carrots, beets, onions and peppers.

How you plant your crops can also affect the total value of your garden, Taylor said. Wide-row planting of such crops as lettuce, spinach, carrots, radishes, beets, onions, beans and peas can greatly increase the yield per row foot.

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