

Achieve your New Year's resolutions with gardening

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As the clock clicked down to midnight on Dec. 31, I spent a few minutes jotting down a few New Year's resolutions as many of you might have before or after the holiday. Some of the typical resolutions may be to eat healthier, lose weight, get more exercise, find a new hobby and reduce stress, and save money. Vegetable gardening can encompass all of those resolutions with a bit of family fun thrown in for good measure.

Since I tend to the vegetable demonstration garden at the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County office, I have the opportunity to plant a variety of vegetable cultivars. This helps me evaluate them to see what does well in this area and share with homeowners some personal tidbits that may not be found in books.

It also gives me the chance to taste and cook the vegetables - for educational purposes, of course. With bountiful turnips in the winter and zucchini in the spring, as well as many other vegetables to eat, I bought a spiralizer, cookbook, and hanging basket for produce as a Christmas present to myself to help me out. My resolution is to eat healthier as well and I struggle to eat vegetables, so I want to make my food fun to eat and replace (or sneak in) some veggies.

I am more encouraged to eat produce that I grew myself than store-bought ones even if it means hunting for a recipe that includes something like mustard greens. I even find that my meat-and-potatoes husband enjoys some of the new recipes and asks for more. Home-grown produce is bountiful in nutrients and often tastes better because it is fresher.

My Master Gardeners maintain several school gardens and some of them cook for the students. I am amazed to hear the stories of children readily eating "odd" foods like turnip greens and kale just because they grew it. Kids love to help garden!

If you tend to your garden, eat what you grow and are selective about your recipes, you can possibly shed some pounds. Gardening just 30 minutes a day is a great form of physical exercise. I'm not much for jogging on a treadmill or doing squats, but being in the garden pulling weeds, planting seedlings, and harvesting vegetables doesn't feel like exercise but my muscles tell me later that it was.

It also benefits my mental well-being. Most of my Master Gardeners tell me that gardening is their therapy and there is a whole branch of gardening called horticultural therapy. My Master Gardeners help at Wilmot Gardens at UF in the greenhouses where the program is dedicated to groups with special needs such as veterans, and cancer and autism patients. Gardening can decrease stress and mental fatigue, while boosting self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Vegetables can be grown year-round if you pay attention to planting dates. The Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>, is a great place to start. Vegetables can be grown in containers, in raised beds, or in the ground, but I am partial to the first two methods since our Florida soil is so poor. I often teach about square-foot gardening based on the book the "All New Square Foot Gardening" by Mel Bartholomew since it is ideal for smaller spaces. The book can be found locally in the IFAS Bookstore, <http://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

If you don't have a garden, it can seem costly at first when you set up your garden, but that initial framework can be used for years. You can have a significant savings in produce costs by growing plants from seed and using homemade compost to add to the soil for nutrients and support. The Southern Heritage Seed Collective is a great place for local seeds and is what I used in my garden this year, as well as seed and transplants from some local stores like Alachua Feed and Seed and various nurseries. There also are great seed sources online.

If you have always wanted a garden but don't know where to start, I have a great line-up of gardening classes for the spring including edible landscaping design, seed starting, Vegetable Gardening 101, growing various fruit, and container gardening. To find out what is coming up, sign up for our newsletter by emailing alachua@ifas.ufl.edu or follow me at <https://www.facebook.com/alachuacountymastergardeners/>.