

Going Green

by Amy Stewart

Organic Vegetable Gardening

As demand surges, gardeners look to IGCs for advice

THE RECENT SURGE IN INTEREST IN ORGANIC vegetable gardening is a welcomed sight for Trey Pitsenberger, Co-owner of The Golden Gecko Garden Center in Garden Valley, CA. "Vegetable gardening is huge," he says. "Next year, I think we'll increase our vegetable selection by 10 to 20 percent."

Thanks to the demand, the garden center's workshops are well-attended. "This is one area we can really build on. Workshops are the way to go for us independents," Pitsenberger says. "We're not just educating our customers, we're creating a feeling of community. We want to be the place you come to for anything to do with the natural world."

Younger homeowners are especially interested in seminars about starting vegetable gardens, with more than 40 percent saying they would likely attend such training sessions, according to "Gen X and Gen Y: What IGCs Need to Know to Profit from the New Gardener," a recent study commissioned by The Independent Garden Center Show.

This year, Pitsenberger is installing a demonstration vegetable garden. He'll hold workshops there and use it to help customers plan their own gardens.

He is also using his weekly e-mail newsletter to keep interest in vegetable gardening alive all season long. "It goes out to 920 recipients, and approximately 200 of them open it," he says, based on statistics provided by the newsletter service he uses. Topics include "tomato envy," or how to grow the biggest tomatoes in the neighborhood,

along with recipes for soil preparation, new products and ideas for growing indoors and extending the season.

Pitsenberger is also tying vegetable gardening to indoor gardening. "We started selling hydroponic supplies, and I remind people that rather than buy hothouse tomatoes in the winter, they can grow them in their own basement," he says. His goal is to encourage people to vegetable garden year-round.

The garden center's fall workshop on extending the season was well-attended. "People didn't realize you can plant cabbage, kale, etc. in the winter," he says.

At The Golden Gecko, winter vegetables like garlic sell late into the season.

Because 90 percent of the products there are organic, even customers who are not organic gardeners are exposed to eco-friendly options at The Golden Gecko. Co-owner Trey Pitsenberger knows his customers are predisposed to accept the advice to go organic: "Gardeners who are not into organics are going to Home Depot."

Motivations

For the most part, Pitsenberger's customers are drawn to organics because of health concerns, both for themselves and their pets.

"I'm also trying to weave in the idea that it's not just about what you grow or what you put on your plate, but how you use your time. Getting out and working in the garden is good for you," he says.

Some of his best vegetable garden customers are chefs rather than gardeners. "We get people who just like the taste of fresh tomatoes," Pitsenberger says. "They may not be much of a gardener, but they want their fresh food."

Organic Veggie Gardening Tips

soil prep

“Our soil is great for finding gold and growing ponderosa pines, but not necessarily for organic vegetable gardening,” says Trey Pitsenberger, Co-owner of The Golden Gecko Garden Center in Garden Valley, CA. He encourages his customers not to skimp on soil preparation: “Out here, they need to add almost 50 percent organic matter to their beds.” The garden center sells bagged compost and mulch from E.B. Stone and FoxFarm. Pitsenberger likes E.B. Stone soil booster, which contains mushroom compost, chicken manure and worm castings, in a 1.5-cubic-foot bag. He sells three bags for \$17 or \$5.99 each. In addition, a planting compost or soil conditioner comes in a 3-cubic-foot bale for \$8.99 or three for \$27. “I want them to start with one bag of each for every 50 to 60 square feet of planting area, and work it into the soil 6 to 12 inches,” he says. “Most people balk at this - they want to start with half of that. But it’s all about the soil.”

keep fertilizing

Pitsenberger sells dry granular blends of organic tomato and vegetable fertilizers. “I do get people in that use [chemical products],” he says, “and I suggest they try other products and see if it doesn’t work better. The dry organic fertilizers are a time saver - you don’t use them as often.” He also likes Maxicrop Kelp Meal and E.B. Stone’s fish emulsion with kelp meal. “These are repeat sales throughout the season,” he says. “People come back for it.”

raised beds

“People literally live on top of a rock here,” Pitsenberger says. Every year, he holds a raised bed workshop and builds a new bed, which he then puts to good use in his own demonstration garden. “I don’t sell the materials to make the raised bed because there’s a hardware store across the street and a lot of my customers are do-it-yourselfers who don’t want to buy a kit,” he says. In keeping with the “green” theme, he doesn’t recommend pressure-treated wood, preferring local redwood or cedar.

check soil pH

If the pH is wrong, plants simply can’t access the nutrients in the soil. “For a new gardener, I’ll sell a pH meter,” Pitsenberger says. He likes the Active Air meter, which checks both moisture and pH levels and retails for \$7.99. “It’s so inexpensive that people usually don’t balk at it,” he says, “and now they’ve got a toy to play with.” His area tends to have acidic soil, so he encourages customers to mix in oyster shell lime with their planting mix at a ratio of one 10-pound bag per 100 square feet.

make good plant selections

Organic gardeners will have much more success with varieties that are naturally pest- and disease-resistant and adapted to the local climate. "I tell people not to plant all heirlooms," Pitsenberger says. "People are excited about them, they're delicious, but some years they produce and some years they don't. I had a customer who lost every heirloom tomato he planted last year." If a customer wants to grow heirloom tomatoes, he encourages them to put in a few recent hybrids as well, like Early Girl, Ace, Big Boy and Better Boy. "I have to watch how I talk about this," Pitsenberger says. "I do have customers who automatically think of GMO when I say hybrid. We have to explain that a hybrid is nothing more than a cross from one plant to another - it's not gene splicing."

set up a smart watering system

Water conservation is an important part of a sustainable vegetable garden, and steady drip irrigation puts less stress on the plants and reduces the possibility of soil-borne pathogens splashing up onto the leaves and spreading disease. But convenience is still the main selling point. "We're huge on drip systems," Pitsenberger says. "It's a great workshop opportunity. Once we show them how to put drippers and sprayers on the same system, and once they see how to hook it up, nine times out of 10 they buy the system. Any garden centers that aren't pushing drip systems are missing an opportunity." He encourages customers to bring in a plan of their garden, and he will draw in the irrigation system and show them the parts they need. "It's a good use of my time," Pitsenberger says. "It's easily \$60 to \$70, if not more." He also sells timers starting at \$39, and encourages customers to use them regardless of whether they're going on vacation. "When it's 105 degrees outside, people will put off getting outside to water," he says. "This will make their garden more successful, and it's an excellent add-on sale."

starter fertilizer

"I always recommend a preplant fertilizer like Sure Start from E.B. Stone," Pitsenberger says. It comes in a 4-pound box for \$7.99. "I like this one because it has mycorrhizae added to it. That's one of the ways I'm able to sell it." He emphasizes the importance of getting beneficial mycorrhizal fungus in the soil so it contacts the roots of the plants and encourages healthy root growth. "Sometimes people say they've already got starter fertilizer at home, and I say, 'Check the label and make sure it's got this beneficial plant fungus.' That's an easy sell." He tells them to sprinkle it on the soil and rake in the top inch or two after the bed is prepared.