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Can't plant your own veggies? Throw in the trowel and hire a professional

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Amanda Brown

Wanda Knapik (left) advises Amy Horowitz on protecting her strawberry from birds in Horowitz's home garden in East Brunswick.

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By Lisa Intrabartola

Amy Horowitz could supply a farm stand with the produce she'll harvest this season from her tree-lined East Brunswick backyard.

Five 4-foot-by-8-foot raised cedar beds are bursting with parsnips, rutabagas, carrots, turnips, kale, spinach, Brussels sprouts, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, culinary herbs, peas, lettuces, arugula and fruit bushes.

In addition to producing what's sure to be a tasty crop, the all-organic garden is tastefully designed with neat, weed-free rows topped just so with compost and mulch. A charming stone path ambles betwixt and between.

No one is more surprised by her backyard bounty than Horowitz, whose

past gardening attempts were limited to scant potted herbs and a waterlogged bed that went belly up midseason.

"I really didn't think I could grow anything else," said the mother of three. "Now I've come full circle with all these amazing vegetables I can't believe grow in my yard."

What's the secret to Horowitz's garden success?

Handing the hoe over to a professional.

Last year Horowitz hired certified permaculture designer and consultant Wanda Knapik for \$1,000 to plan, design and install the fenced-in beds.

"She does all the grunt work," said Horowitz. "I wouldn't have been able to know how to do that myself. She makes it so easy because we're all so busy these days."

She isn't the only Garden State resident willing to pay a green thumb for vegetable gardening services.

"Like a lot of things you can do yourself, a lot of times with a professional it's faster and better," said Bernardsville resident Ed English who had his three 4-foot-by-4-foot raised, caged beds planned and installed by Knapik last season. "There are people in this town who have put together their own cars, but I wouldn't recommend it."

English's first taste of garden success included lettuces, kale, arugula, Swiss chard, peas, beans, cucumbers, garlic, herbs and cherry tomatoes. The fruit of Knapik's labor set him back about \$875, which English considered a "very reasonable" investment.

"It's hard to put in a garden yourself," he said. "I've grown things in pots before, but with the deer that we have and all the little rabbits and ground hogs and so forth it's almost impossible to do your own garden."

According to Knapik, English isn't exaggerating.

Gardening is basically more of a challenge in New Jersey, she says, because so many buildings have moved into places where wild animals once lived. "There's more development and less space for the critters," she said.

The need for critter control and growing interest in organic gardening spawned Knapik's Bernardsville-based company My Local Garden three years ago. Since then, Knapik and her team of eight gardeners, permaculture designers and consultants have installed or revived about 50 gardens of all sizes, including one she built from scratch -- with an irrigation system -- for Mendham High School's culinary arts program in April 2009. Knapik estimates that 95 percent of her business comes from clients requesting varying levels of assistance starting and maintaining their backyard gardens.

"I try to convert lawns to food," she said. "People call me specifically because they want to grow food."

"Reap what you sow"

The resurgence of food gardening in the United States is overwhelming, according to a National Gardening Association survey. Seven million more households planned to grow their own fruits, vegetables, herbs or berries in 2009 than in 2008 -- a 19 percent increase in participation. This increase is nearly double the 10 percent growth in vegetable gardening from 2007 to 2008.

Being able to pick homegrown produce provides Horowitz with peace of mind, especially after recent E. coli outbreaks and lettuce recalls.

"I know where it's coming from. I know there's no chemicals on it, and I get the enjoyment of seeing it grow, knowing I grew it myself."

In addition to improved quality and taste, growing your own produce saves money. On average, the NGA estimates a well-maintained food garden will yield a \$500 return when considering a typical gardener's investment and the market price of produce.

Although paying a professional to install a vegetable garden seems to defeat the cost-saving benefits of doing it yourself, English argues it makes more sense than springing for a lawn service.

"You never get anything back from the lawn," he said. "At least with the garden you get back some vegetables that you like, and quite often they're vegetables that you can't find in the store."

Getting started with one of Knapik's 4-foot-by-4-foot caged cedar beds costs about \$500; however, most of her projects exceed \$1,000, with some lavishly landscaped herb-and-vegetable creations topping out at \$10,000.

To Knapik, it's simple: you reap what you sow.

"To do it right it's expensive. People don't realize the setup is so critical. You spend time and money and energy anyway, you might as well start it right."

Horticulturist and Cook College graduate Trisha Coene's clients are mostly high-end and don't intend to work in their gardens at all. One client's extensive organic garden kept Coene busy nearly six hours a week from May through October. At \$85 an hour, that's more than a \$12,000 investment.

"But it was perfect," Coene said. "I'm talking deadheading all the marigolds, not a weed in sight. It was all organic, so I'm picking bugs off plants. It's intense. But it depends upon the level people want."

What many of Coene's clients want -- aside from organic herbs and vegetables within arm's reach -- is an opportunity to expose their children to a living outdoor classroom.

"My first client in Bernardsville, she just wanted her children to come out and learn about it and spend time in the garden. It was another kind of learning tool for the kids, and they really took a big interest in it," she said. "Sometimes they'll just come out on their own with the nanny or whatever, and they'll play in there, and they'll take an interest, and they'll want to do what I'm doing."

Coene has designed, installed and maintained five organic vegetable, herb and flower combination gardens, in Bernardsville, Madison and Far Hills since 2001 when she began creating kitchen gardens professionally as a horticulturist at Merck World Headquarters in Whitehouse Station.

Connect with nature

Coene now owns and operates the High Bridge-based GreenCraft Landscape Associates with her certified landscape architect husband, Rob DeStefano, but her kitchen garden clients represent only a small percentage of their business.

"It's expensive, especially if you're having someone maintain it for you," she said. "So there are not too many people who can afford that."

Knapik knows that even her low-end projects are just not in the budget for many in this economy. For cash-strapped families interested in gaining enough garden know-how to go it on their own, Knapik suggests a consultation for \$50 to \$100.

"Then people do the work themselves. I just tell them what to do," she said. "I understand that garden therapy is what some people need right now."

Even so, hiring a professional "is not a reality" for most novice gardeners, said Steve Parker, owner of Parker Gardens in Scotch Plains.

Parker's landscape and garden center stocks about 200 varieties of vegetable and herb bedding plants along with seeds, soil, fertilizers, composts, raised beds, garden containers and deer fencing.

Sales of all products related to food gardening have been "substantially up" the last two seasons, said Parker. That led him to advertise professional installation services this year: \$35 to plant vegetables purchased from his center in an existing garden; \$100 to start from scratch.

"They want it done for them if they can get it done," Parker said of convenience-carving customers. "Especially the younger generation, they don't want to do it from scratch but want to enjoy it," he said. "We've gotten more (garden installation work) because we publicized it, but not as much as I would have thought. Most people still do it themselves."

DIY is a goal Knapik and many of her clients are striving toward.

"It's about connecting people with nature," she said.

Once she helps a client "get over the hump" of creating a garden, Knapik said she passes on her knowledge -- "what to grow, where to grow, how to grow, when to grow" -- so they can keep it going.

"Wanda is a great teacher and she explains everything as she is doing it," said Horowitz, who plans to rely on Knapik for soil preparation and mulching next season, but hopes to handle all the planting on her own.

"You put this tiny little thing the size of a poppy seed into the ground and it blooms in to this plant. To see the entire thing from start to finish is incredibly satisfying," she said. "I'm addicted now."