

# *From the Heart. . .*

## *. . . Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



### ***Spicing Up Your Meals and Life***

Here's the first tip. If you want to spice up your love life, you may just want to start with spicing up your meals! You never know until you try! How many years have we been told that the way to a man's heart (women too!) is to create a meal to remember—just for them. So, listen up men! This is not just for us women.

How's your herbs and spices know-how? According to the *Food Lover's Companion*, **Herbs** are "the fragrant leaves of any of various annual or perennial plants that grow in temperate zones and do not have woody stems. Herbs can be purchased in dried or fresh forms . . . They can be found at various times of year, depending on the herb."

After you choose herbs that have a clean, fresh fragrance and a bright color without any sign of wilting or browning, you can store them in the refrigerator wrapped in a barely damp paper towel and sealed airtight for up to five days. For longer storage of 10 days depending on the herb, " place the bouquet of herbs, stem end down, in a tall glass and fill with cold water until the ends are covered by 1 inch. Cover the top of the bouquet with a plastic bag, securing it to the glass with a rubber band. " You can also place herbs in a screw-top jar in the same manner and sealed tightly, with water

changed every two days. Just remember before using, wash the herbs and blot dry with a paper towel.

**“Dried herbs** are available year-round in metal or cardboard boxes, bottles, cellophane packages and unglazed ceramic pots. They have a stronger, more concentrated flavor than fresh herbs, but quickly lose their pungency. Crushed or ground herbs become lackluster more quickly than whole herbs.” So, keep them stored airtight to increase longevity in a cool, dark place for a maximum of six months. Best to refrigerate after 3 months. Herbs are used to flavor all kinds of food and drink, used alone or in combination, in appropriate quantities to insure just the right flavor. Some herb examples are BASIL, BAY LEAF, CHERVIL, CORIANDER, MARJORAM, MINT, OREGANO, PARSLEY, ROSEMARY, SAGE, SAVORY, TARRAGON and THYME.

**Spices** are “Pungent or aromatic seasonings obtained from the bark, buds, fruit, roots, seeds or stems of various plants and trees (whereas [HERBS](#) usually come from the leafy part of a plant). Spices were prized long before recorded history. Though they've always been used to flavor food and drink, throughout the eons spices have also been favored for a plethora of other uses including crowning emperors, making medicines and perfumes, religious ceremonies and as burial accoutrements for the wealthy.

Spices and herbs have been used in foods for centuries. According to the American Spice Trade Associations (ASTA), “Archeologists estimate that by 50,000 B.C. primitive man had discovered that parts of certain aromatic plants help make food taste better.” Throughout the generations, spices have been a rich commodity in trade

and commerce that even resulted in the discovery of the New World. The United States today is the world's major spice buyer. Some examples of the more popular spices are ALLSPICE, CARDAMOM, CINNAMON, CLOVES, GINGER, MACE, NUTMEG, PAPRIKA, PEPPER, SAFFRON and TURMERIC. Spices are also sold in blends, such as CURRY POWDER. Spices are available whole and ground. Ground spices quickly lose their flavor, so keeping them stored in small quantities works best. Whole spices can be ground when needed. "Store spices in airtight containers in a cool, dark place for no more than six months. Spices are used to enhance a wide variety of food, both sweet and savory. They should be used sparingly so they don't overpower the foods being seasoned."

Although there is every brand and dry mix out there, try fresh whenever you can. You will need to learn how to cook and garnish with them to bring out the greatest aroma, retain their flavor and preserve their high nutrition. Yet, for most of us who are on the run at work and home, having a pantry cabinet full of the latest and best dry herbs and spices are just fine.

Now, your gourmet chef may not agree; but let's get real here. How many of us have a vibrant herb garden we lovingly tend? I know I don't. I depend on my hubby to be the herb/spice expert. Sure, it's a cop-out, but it's a loving cop-out since John loves to cook and try out new herbs in recipes. So, I just accommodate him by enjoying his culinary results.

How many of us have the greatest intentions when we buy those fresh herbs, but find them a week later wilted to nothing or gooey and mushy in the back of the refrigerator? Join me with raising your hand, and don't be shy! For those who actually

use what you buy, here are some **Basic Herb & Spice Tips** for those who want to retain flavor in your foods while cutting back on dietary fat, sugar and sodium/salt (source: The American Spice Trade Association & Alice Henneman, MS, RD, Extension Educator, Nebraska University Cooperative Extension, Lancaster County).

- **Reducing Fat** - removing a tablespoon of fat removes about 10 grams of fat and 100 calories—*an amount which could represent a 10 pound weight loss in a year*. The calories in herbs and spices are far less than in breadings, batters, gravies, sauces and fried foods
- **Reducing Sugar** - Reduce or eliminate sugar by using these sweet-tasting spices: Allspice, Cloves, Anise, Ginger, Cardamom, Mace, Cinnamon, Nutmeg
- **Reducing Salt** – Use savory flavors with a “bite” such as black pepper, garlic powder, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, coriander and onion, are the most effective in replacing the taste of salt. Omit the salt when cooking pasta and flavor with basil, oregano, parsley and pepper or use an Italian seasoning blend. Use *powdered* garlic and onion rather than their *salt* form. Use half as much of the powdered form. Check labels to see if salt or sodium are listed among the ingredients.

In addition, here are some basic books on herbs and spices to check out:

*American Spice Trade Association*, [www.astaspice.org](http://www.astaspice.org)  
*CNN herbs chart*, <http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/indepth.food/herbs/chart.html>  
*Foods Substitutes, Herb/Spices/Flavorings*,  
<http://www.foodsubs.com/FGFlavorings.html>  
*Herb & Spice Chart* online,  
[http://www.epicurious.com/cooking/how\\_to/herbandspice](http://www.epicurious.com/cooking/how_to/herbandspice)  
*McCormick*, [www.mccormick.com](http://www.mccormick.com)  
*The Herb Book* by John B. Lust. Benedict Lust Publications (June 2001)  
*The Spice Hunter*, <http://www.spicehunter.com/>

Next week we will cover examples of food & flavor combinations, substitutions, and preferred quantities. Be sure and check out your local grocery stores for those wonderful fresh and dry herbs including the latest gadgets to help herb your way to culinary heaven! Even take a class!

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## **Flavor & Food Combinations—Meal Time Delights**

Have you spiced up your life yet with all the great herbs and spices available today? Do you wonder what kinds of herbs and spices go with what food? The flavor of certain spices and herbs has been associated with different cultures, such as Oregano with Italian cooking, Cilantro with Mexican cooking, Ginger with Chinese cooking, and Marjoram with French cooking.

Here are some tips from a variety of sources listed at the end of the article to get you started to not only enjoy a variety of flavors but also reduce your salt, fat, and sugar intake. Enjoy experimenting this weekend on some of your favorite meat, vegetables, and dessert dishes.

### **Meat, poultry and fish—**

(For 1 ½ teaspoon **Italian seasoning**, substitute a *combination* of 1/4 teaspoon *each* of crumbled dried oregano leaves, marjoram leaves, basil leaves, 1/8 teaspoon rubbed sage; For each 1 teaspoon of **poultry seasoning**, substitute a *combination* of 3/4 teaspoon ground sage, 1/4 teaspoon ground thyme. When substituting, you will often be more successful substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, rather than the other way around. For example, think potato salad with fresh vs. dried parsley!)

**Beef:** Bay leaf, marjoram, nutmeg, onion, pepper, sage, thyme

**Lamb:** Curry powder, garlic, rosemary, mint

**Pork:** Garlic, onion, sage, pepper, oregano

**Veal:** Bay leaf, curry powder, ginger, marjoram, oregano

**Chicken:** Ginger, marjoram, oregano, paprika, poultry seasoning, rosemary, sage, tarragon, thyme

**Fish:** Curry powder, dill, dry mustard, marjoram, paprika, pepper

## **Vegetables—**

**Carrots:** Cinnamon, cloves, dill, ginger, marjoram, nutmeg, rosemary, sage

**Corn:** Cumin, curry powder, onion, paprika, parsley

**Green Beans:** Dill, curry powder, marjoram, oregano, tarragon, thyme

**Greens:** Onion, pepper

**Potatoes:** Dill, garlic, onion, paprika, parsley, sage

**Summer Squash:** Cloves, curry powder, marjoram, nutmeg, rosemary, sage

**Winter Squash:** Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, onion

**Tomatoes:** Basil, bay leaf, dill, marjoram, onion, oregano, parsley, pepper

## **Desserts—**

**Apple dishes (e.g. pie, tarts, turnovers):** For each 1 teaspoon of **apple pie spice**, substitute a ground *combination* of 1 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg

**Pumpkin dishes:** For 1 teaspoon of **pumpkin pie spice**, substitute a ground *combination* of 1 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/4 teaspoon ginger, 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg, 1/8 teaspoon allspice

## **Substituting Equivalent Amounts of Different Forms**

As a general rule for substituting equivalent amounts in different forms, I encourage you to start with a tested recipe from a reliable source. If you are creating your own recipe, begin with trying one or two spices or herbs. The amount to add varies with the

type of spice or herb, type of recipe, and personal preference. Here are some basic substitutions amounts that may work for you. Remember to use more herbs if using fresh or crumbled dry form—

1 tablespoon finely cut fresh herbs: 1 teaspoon crumbled dried herbs: 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon ground dried herbs

## When to Add Spices & Herbs

The type of herb and food for which it is used determines when to add it during food preparation:

- **Add FRESH herbs during cooking.** As a general rule, add fresh herbs near the end of the cooking time or just before serving as prolonged heating can cause flavor and aroma losses. Add the more delicate fresh herbs, basil, chives, cilantro, dill leaves, parsley, marjoram, and mint a minute or two before the end of cooking or sprinkle them on the food before it is served. The less delicate fresh herbs, such as dill seeds, oregano, rosemary, tarragon and thyme, can be added about the last 20 minutes of cooking. For some foods, such as breads, batters, etc., you will need to add fresh herbs at the beginning of the cooking process.
- **Add DRIED herbs and spices during cooking. Whole dried spices and herbs** (such as whole allspice and bay leaves) release their flavors slower than crumbled or ground ones. Whole dried spices are ideal for dishes cooking an hour or more, such as soups and stews. Secure whole spices, such as cloves, in a tea ball for easy removal at the end of cooking. Also, remove bay leaves at the end of cooking. **Ground dried**



**spices and herbs** release their flavor quickly and may taste best in shorter-cooking recipes or added nearer the end of longer-cooking ones.

**Crumbled dried herbs** may differ when using milder herbs (such as basil) and is best added for greater flavor toward the end of cooking. More robust herbs (such as thyme) can stand longer cooking periods. **Freshly grinding spices** (such as black pepper and nutmeg) provides more flavor than buying them already ground. This also applies to using them in uncooked foods.

- **UNCOOKED foods.** When starting with uncooked foods, both fresh and dried spices and herbs several hours before serving to allow flavors to blend.

## Storing Spices and Herbs

Try out some of the following guidelines for storing your spices and herbs to maintain maximum quality.

- To prevent flavor and color loss, avoid moisture, light, heat and air.
- Store in tightly covered containers.
- Store in a dark place away from sunlight, such as inside a cupboard or drawer. Avoid storage above the dishwasher, microwave, stove or refrigerator, or near a sink or heating vent.
- If storing in an open spice rack, store in a site away from heat, light and moisture. Avoid sprinkling dried spices and herbs directly from container into a steaming pot to prevent moisture from entering the container.
- Use a dry spoon to measure spices and herbs from a container.

- Keep these points in mind regarding refrigerator/freezer storage:  
Refrigerate paprika, chili powder and red pepper for best color retention, especially in summer or hotter climates. Spices and herbs can get wet if condensation forms when a cold container from a refrigerator or freezer is left open in a humid kitchen.

## How Long To Keep Spices and Herbs

Here are some guidelines to help you determine when it is time to toss your spices and herbs. As general rule, keep:

- 1 year for ground herbs or spices
- 2 years for whole spices

Buy a smaller container until you determine how fast you will use a particular spice or herb. If a spice or herb smells strong and flavorful, it is probably still potent. Check an herb or a ground spice by rubbing a small amount in your hand. If the aroma is fresh, rich and immediate, it can still flavor foods. Check a whole spice, such as a clove or cinnamon stick by breaking, crushing or scraping it before smelling it. Be careful to avoid smelling pepper or chili powder as they can irritate your nose and bronchial passages. Initial quality will influence shelf life. Label date of purchase on container with a permanent marking pen.

Resources:

UCLA Exotic Flavors and Medicines,

<http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/biomed/spice/index.cfm>

<http://lancaster.unl.edu/food/spiceherbshandout-color.pdf%20>

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

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### ***Herbs & Healing—a pharmacopeia of chemistry***

From bad hair days, bee stings, and boils to stomach aches, warts, and wrinkles, we all try them. That is, we head for the “natural” herbal aisle to try the latest home remedy. We try to read the label, but find no solace in the foreign language found there. Whether it is some herbal medicinal product or dietary supplement mix, only a chemist can really make any sense of it, it seems.

Yet, herbs have been around for thousands of years in thousands of ancient cultures, concocting their healing remedies. And, believe it or not, many worked just fine. In fact, the origins of the pharmaceutical industry comes from the many travels to distant shores to find that unique plant, talk with the local peoples, and give it try. As the centuries past, researchers began to synthesize specific compounds we are familiar with today.

Today you can also just add a variety of herbs to your daily eating routine, and the nutrients and plant chemistry contained will do their job in enhancing the quality of your nutrient intake and taste buds—hopefully without any side affects or allergies.

Yet, when it comes to creating medicinal compounds from herbs, that is a very different story all together.

Where would you even begin to give it a try? First, I am no expert here. I'm right there with you staring at the label and wondering whether to trust what I hold will help in some way. That is why over the years as I journeyed back to health and wholeness, I greatly appreciated the company of healthcare providers and nutritional consultants to help me through the maze. So, I'm not here to give you medical advice on what herb to put on your blister or soothe your bloating stomach. Feel free to connect with your local and national health/wellness providers.

Yet, this topic comes up all the time. "Sharon, what do you use for this problem?" Most of the time, I just say what personally works for me without any guarantee that it will work for them. This is definitely in the antidotal realm of patient to patient, friend to friend. Don't we all do this? I can only imagine what some doctors say about that! But, fortunately, we have some great integrative and alternative providers available to us all over the country today. They hear this every day and many times applaud their patients' informed decisions; and graciously correct them when needed.

So, when attempting to treat some particular health problem with herbs and spices, I encourage you to become an informed health-conscious consumer/patient. To help you seek useful and credible resources, I have listed those basic references and websites that I hope will help you get started—that is, if you are particularly interested in using herbs medicinally in some way. Again, I encourage you to check into your local healthcare provider and pharmacist that have herbal know-how. And by all means, tell your family physician what you are taking in order to avoid negative side affects from herbal/drug interactions—that goes for any herbs/spices you may be

using in foods while taking certain medicines. Herbs and other foods can also create increased absorption of medicines raising your dosage or interfere with the prescribed medicine's absorption ability. So, an informed consumer/patient is a wise consumer/patient.

American Botanical Council, <http://abc.herbalgram.org/site/PageServer>  
American Nutraceutical Association, <http://www.ana-jana.org/>  
Center for Science in the Public Interest, <http://www.cspinet.org/>  
Colorado State University, Medicinal Herb Research on the Internet,  
<http://lib.colostate.edu/research/medherbs/>  
Dr. Duke's Phytochemical & Ethnobotanical Database, <http://www.ars-grin.gov/duke/>  
Duke's Handbook of Medicinal Herbs of the Bible by James A. Duke (2007)  
Herb Research Foundation, <http://www.herbs.org/>  
National Agricultural Library, USDA, <http://www.nal.usda.gov/ref/herbs.html>  
Natural Physician's Healing Therapies by Mark Stengler, MD (2002)  
The Green Pharmacy Herbal Handbook: Your Everyday Reference to the Best Herbs for Healing by James A. Duke, PhD (2002)  
The Green Pharmacy: The Ultimate Compendium of Natural Remedies by James A. Duke, PhD (1998)  
The Herb Book, by John B. Lust. (2001)  
The Juicing Bible by Pat Crocker (2000)

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## ***From Herb Pots to Herb Farm***

“Herb gardens have a special magic. Filled with alluring fragrances, color, textures, and flavors, they reflect a rich and diverse history. Used to flavor our food, to treat our ailments, and to soothe our souls, herbs enhance our lives in so many ways that it is hard to imagine doing without them.”

Miranda Smith, author of *Your Backyard Herb Garden*, loves her herbs and shows us how to grow them in our own backyard. Whether you are living in an apartment or on a spacious farm, she encourages you to find a special spot for your very own herb garden. There is nothing more satisfying than picking a basil leaf or rosemary stem from your own herb treasure garden. In our younger years, John tended and I plucked a large vegetable and herbal garden on some acreage. Now that we have a smaller place, we look forward to starting to work on our own little plot of herbal heaven.

Let's start with the simplicity and convenience of herbs in a pot. Charlie Nardoizzi of the National Gardening Association (<http://garden.org>) has some basic tips for herb potting to get you started:

### **Materials List**

- Large plastic or wooden container
- Potting soil

- Herb plants of your choice
- Fertilizer
- Water

## **Steps**

1. Choose containers. Select a container with drainage holes, the larger the better. An 18-inch diameter faux terra cotta or half whiskey barrel provides enough space to grow a variety of herb plants. If you don't have a large container, select a number of smaller pots and plant a single herb in each one.
2. Choose soil. Fill the container with bagged potting soil. If you're using a very large container, fill the bottom with a layer of empty soda cans. The cans will take up volume so you'll need less soil to fill the pot.
3. Choose herbs. Select herbs that you commonly use in cooking, but don't forget to try a few new ones. It's easiest to purchase herb plants from a garden or home center rather than starting with herb seeds, and plants will give you instant results. You can usually find basil, cilantro, thyme, oregano, sage, rosemary, and parsley at garden centers. Some unusual herbs to try include lemongrass, lovage, and French tarragon.
4. Plant your herb garden! Moisten the soil thoroughly. Arrange the plants so that those that grow tall, such as basil and lemongrass, are in the center and cascading varieties of herbs, such as thyme and oregano, are along the edge. Plant them close together: 10 herb plants will fit in a half whiskey barrel!

5. Water and fertilize. Sprinkle a time-release fertilizer in the pot, scratch it into the surface and water well after planting. Water frequently to keep soil evenly moist, but not sopping wet.
6. Harvest regularly. Once the plants show new growth, you can begin harvesting. Snip off whole stems rather than individual leaves to encourage bushy, new growth. Never take more than one third of a single plant at a time. By following this pattern your plants should supply you with seasonings through the entire growing season.

Nardozzi encourages you to add a visual appeal by growing attractive ornamentals of culinary herbs, such as purple basil and tricolor sage. In addition, if herb plants get overgrown, significantly cut them back to compel new growth.

If you cook a lot, you most likely already know what herb plants you want to grow in your container garden. If this is your first try, start with ones easy-to-grow, such as parsley, chives, cilantro or thyme. You can also grow herbs that correspond to your favorite cuisines: cilantro for Mexican food, basil and rosemary for Italian, mint and chamomile for tea, lemongrass and Thai basil for Thai food. Just make sure you grow something you believe you will use. If you don't like mint, don't grow it.

Some herbs are best in their own individual pots, such as mint or rosemary. Others like thyme and sage, are planted together in window boxes that can conveniently sit on the walls of your patio or even your front door walkway. Be creative but insure there is enough appropriate light and water for healthy growth. Find a sunny window and place your herb containers nearby. Put the sun lovers in the center (i.e. oregano) and the less demanding on the side or in the area of filtered sunlight.



What fun to be cooking in your kitchen and decide to grab a couple fresh herbs near by. Whether your herb garden is inside your home on your kitchen windowsill or just outside on your patio or front door, enjoy the fragrance and convenience of creative cooking with herbs right at home. Check out the sources listed below and locally at your garden store and nature center; and by all means take an herb cooking class! Next week, we will go outdoors to cruise through an herb farm for those who have a little extra plot of land to play with.

Resources:

A Handful Of Herbs: Gardening, Cooking And Decorating by Barbara Segall (2005)

Your Backyard Herb Garden: A Gardener's Guide to Growing Over 50 Herbs Plus

How to Use Them in Cooking, Crafts, Companion Planting and More by Miranda Smith (1999)

The Herbal Kitchen: Cooking with Fragrance and Flavor by Jerry Traunfeld (2005)

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### ***Herb Gardens & Farms—A Mealtime Treasure***

Whether you want to start a 20x20 ft. herb garden on your two acres or an herb farm on a thousand acres, both require consummate planning. For those who actually want to start an herb farming business, connect with experts who have gone before you both locally and nationally. I'm definitely not your source for this project. Yet, here are a number of resources I encourage you to consider:

<http://altnature.com/herbfarming/considerations.htm>

<http://www.ahpa.org/>

<http://www.herbworld.com/>

<http://www.agmrc.org/agmrc/commodity/specialitycrops/herbs/herbs.htm>

[http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/AFSIC\\_pubs/mherb.htm](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/AFSIC_pubs/mherb.htm)

<http://www.herbsociety.org/>

<http://www.usna.usda.gov/>

<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/>

<http://grow.garden.org/>

When marketing herbs to the public, there are significant protocols and safety measures that will be required locally, statewide, and nationally. So, if you are that passionate about heading into this territory, become well educated and connected with these resources.

For those of us who just want to have an herb garden or very small herb farm on two acres for personal culinary enjoyment for family and friends, start with this essential first

step from Charlie Nardozzi, National Gardening Association

(<http://www.garden.org/ediblelandscaping/?page=veg-garden-design>).

***Begin with a well thought out edible landscape design  
that will offer you a wide range of seasonal food choices,  
including herbs to enjoy year round.***

Nardozzi encourages us to experiment with new varieties, plant combinations, and techniques to make your vegetable garden a productive, fun, and attractive part of your landscape. Vegetable gardens can be as beautiful as any flower garden while also providing food for the table. All it takes is planning well.

***Preparation drawings*** – To design your garden from scratch, plot it on graph paper. Use paper with a grid of ¼ inch squares, with each square representing one foot in the garden. Outline the beds in pencil, then fill in the plant names.

***Size*** – Once you have a plan, you're ready to measure out the garden. You'll need a tape measure, plenty of string, 1-foot-long wooden stakes, and a hammer to drive the stakes into the ground. A 20x20 foot garden will give you room to grow a wide range of crops, including some that need a lot of space, such as sweet corn and winter squash. A 10x12 foot plot is sufficient for a garden sampler with a variety of greens, herbs, a few tomatoes and peppers, beans, cucumbers, basil, parsley, and edible flowers such as nasturtiums.

***Position*** – For best sun exposure, orient the garden so the beds run east to west, with the tallest plants on the north end. This will reduce the chance of one vegetable shading another. Following your plan, drive a stake in each of the four corners of the garden. At this point you'll need to remove any sod and rototill or

turn the soil by hand to loosen the soil and remove weeds. Before you plant, have the soil tested to determine the soil pH and nutrient levels. Most vegetables require a pH between 6.0 and 6.8. Add limestone to raise the pH in high-rainfall areas; add sulfur to lower the pH in the arid West. Your state university's cooperative extension service or local garden center will have information on obtaining a soil test kit.

***Inventory of plants/ What to Eat?*** – This is the fun part, deciding what to grow. The simplest and most obvious is what vegetables and herbs do you like to eat? You simply only grow what you want to eat. Though, always include flowers in your garden, even if they aren't edible. They are beautiful to cut and bring indoors. Flowers also attract pollinating and beneficial insects to the garden. By growing plants in succession and using 3 foot-wide beds with 18-inch paths, you should have plenty of luscious vegetables for fresh eating and extras for sharing. Tuck some chosen vegetables here and there in flowerbeds, along with having a main vegetable garden area to concentrate the food production. The main vegetable garden doesn't have to be all veggies, though. Feel free to include herbs, edible flowers, and fruits.

***Lay Out the Beds*** – Now it's time to lay it all out. Measure, stake, and outline each bed with string. To make a raised a bed, first loosen the soil using a shovel or a garden fork, then shovel soil from an adjacent path onto the bed. Keep adding soil until the bed is about 8 to 10 inches tall. Smooth the soil on the surface of the bed by raking it flat with an iron rake. Draw the soil evenly between the string boundaries, letting excess soil fall off the edge of the bed outside the string. The

object is to end up with a flat-topped raised bed that extends fully to the string boundaries about 8 inches above the pathway. Raised beds can be any shape you want as long as they aren't wider than 3 feet. The center of a bed is hard to reach if it's any wider than that.

***Feed the Soil*** – Build up the soil with natural fertilizers and compost before you plant. It may take time to build fertile, rich soil using organic fertilizer and amendments, but the nutrients from organic products are released into the soil slowly, providing weeks of nutrition to the plants. Once each bed is formed, add a 1 to 2 inch-thick layer of compost over the surface and work it into the soil with your rake. Use supplemental fertilizers to correct nutrient problems discovered in the soil test and to side-dress vegetables during the growing season. These fertilizers can be in granular or liquid form.

***How to Plant Them*** – Many vegetables are best started from seeds sown directly in the ground (direct-sown); others go in as seedlings. You can grow your own seedlings indoors or buy them. In early spring, a week or two before the last frost, direct sow crops that grow best in cool weather, such as beets, carrots, parsnips, peas, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard, and turnips, as well as the many delectable exotic greens such as arugula, Asian mustards, and mesclun mix. These greens grow particularly fast from seed. After the last frost, direct-sow warm-weather vegetables, such as beans, cucumbers, corn, and squash. Among herbs, dill, basil, and cilantro are sure bets from direct-sown seed.

***Transplants*** – Some vegetables need to be planted outside as transplants because they take so long to mature. Others just grow better from seedlings

versus seed sown in the ground. Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower can be started either way but setting transplants outside usually works best. Eggplants, leeks, peppers, and tomatoes need to be started from transplants because they need such a long growing season.

***Right Time to Plant*** – The average date of frost in spring is the key date to use in garden planning. If you don't know the date for your region, check with your local cooperative extension service or garden center. You can safely plant the cool-season vegetables, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, celery, parsley, peas, radishes, and spinach, a few weeks before the last frost date. In mild-winter climates, these crops are usually planted in fall for a winter garden. Arugula, beets, leaf lettuce, parsnips, potatoes, and Swiss chard are a bit less frost-hardy but still grow well in cool weather. Plant warm-season vegetables, such as green beans, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, melons, peppers, summer squash, and tomatoes only after the threat of frost has passed.

***Special Tips and Techniques*** – There are special tips and techniques that can make your veggie garden more efficient and productive.

- A favorite is *Succession Planting*. A good example of succession planting is growing a warm-season crop such as beans in the same spot where you just harvested a cool-season crop such as spinach.
- *Interplanting* is another way to maximize your planting space. Plant quick-maturing crops, such as lettuce, around slow growers, such as broccoli.

- When growing more than one of any type of vegetable, tomatoes, for instance, plant several different varieties—to increase chance of success of varieties.
- Extend harvest season if you plant early, mid- and late-season varieties.

Nardozzi particularly loves raised beds. He believes raised beds are the best way to grow the most vegetables with the least amount of work. The only times he recommends not using raised beds is when you have sandy soil, live in a very dry area, and are growing crops that need hilling and mounding, such as potatoes.

Otherwise, raise the soil to experience these benefits:

- They warm up and dry out faster in spring, so plants get a jump on the season.
- You can grow more vegetables in less space and have less area devoted to paths.
- They create attractive, well-organized planting areas.
- They save on the amount of fertilizer and compost used because it's concentrated just on the planting beds.
- It's less work, especially if you make permanent raised beds bordered with wood, bricks, or stone. You won't have to remake the beds each spring.
- The plants will have healthy root systems because you won't be stepping on the planting bed, compacting the soil, and making it hard for roots to grow.
- You can be more creative with design, making round raised beds for example, and planting vegetables, herbs, and flowers in various designs on the raised beds.

- It's easy to plant climbers such as cucumbers up an A-frame trellis because it fits nicely over a 3-foot bed.
- It's easy to fit season extenders such as row covers with wire hoops over the 3-foot beds.
- Most important of all, raised beds are beautiful!