

PDX Garden Stories

Interviews with participants in Growing Gardens Home Gardens Program Portland, Oregon

Interview with Justine

Conducted by Tomasz Low, Kyle Polson & Taylor Walker

Portland State University, Urban Agriculture & Food Systems Capstone, Spring 2015

Faculty Instructor: Nathan McClintock, PhD

These here are my tomatoes. We've the regular red tomatoes. These are all the starts I got from Growing Gardens. We've got a couple cucumbers and some bell peppers and some eggplant as well. My zucchini seeds didn't take, so I had to work fast to get my pumpkin seeds in so that I'm not wasting all my space.

How long have you been with Growing Gardens?

This is my third year gardening with them. The first year I had a garden a little bit bigger than this but my second year I just had a bed because I was with Grow Portland and they charge a lot of money and I needed a more discounted garden plots so I went with Portland Rec. In that in between year I had a bed at my church and I threw in my tomatoes so I could still be involved. But I got back this year and I got a bigger garden.

Did you use starts for these tomatoes here?

I got all these from Growing Garden's distribution day. This was my first garden [looking at pictures] and I did beds. I had straw for little walkways. You know my mentor told me that's how I should do it so I followed her advice to make the beds. That was a little pumpkin patch in the back, I had a lot of squash and a strawberry little field and here's where I had all my tomatoes. Nine beds total. This was just some of the construction in getting it done. This plot was with Grow Portland. The plot was a little bit larger than this one.

How successful have you been here with yield?

So far I've had this stuff two weeks and look how vibrant it's become. Everything is taking to the soil really well. Its very healthy. I'm hoping the pumpkins are going to be just as amazing and healthy. My squash that I had from this garden, the squash was big, it was vibrant, it was healthy. All the food was really, really nice. You know, I tried to do it right. I tilled the area and then I brought in new soil and filled it in.

When did you harvest the squash? In the fall or in the summer?

They came in September and throughout that month. I think I got them before October that year, so these pumpkins will probably come in October because I got to them a little late. And then, I don't even know how I got these little pumpkins. They just grew. I don't remember putting seeds in for those or anything.

(07:41)The reason I started a garden was because me and my son were low income. We didn't really get enough healthy food and we didn't have enough to eat. You know, if you buy the vegetables its more expensive and then you end up with less food on the other end. I was just really thinking about it. I went to the library and I saw the garden plot. And the whole idea came together and I remember learning about Growing Gardens through a play group I was in. So I called them up and then I called Grow Portland for the plots. And I got started and it's been great! They've supplied me with new tools, seeds. They've just been really helpful in showing me and mentoring me through the first year. I mean now people are asking me for advice in gardening tips! So my friends at church and the ladies there, you know because I brought the tomatoes and some of the ladies bought them and they're always asking me, "How do you get your tomatoes? How do you do it?" I just passed on the information I learned from Growing Gardens.

So do you communicate more with your neighbors now more than before your garden? Has it built up any sort of community?

Well they have some pot lucks sometimes here with all the gardeners. They come together and they have a thing at the end where they have a pot luck with the vegetables and all that. Yea with my neighbors, I'll have all this extra stuff. And I have this wagon that I use to carry the stuff to my neighbors, like we had all these extra pumpkins and I gave my neighbors each one. Yea! It's been fun! I'm hoping this will produce a lot of stuff this year too. I've got 7 tomatoes, so that's a lot! This is great because tomatoes are really expensive in the store.

Getting tomatoes at the store doesn't have the same taste. It's just a different fruit.

(10:21)Yea! Getting food from the garden is fresher and delicious and all the smells. Being here...it smells great, feels great. I love this as a hobby and I think I'm going to continue to keep gardening if I can. After this year, we are thinking about moving to a different state and if we do I want to continue the gardening and find the plots and all that when I move. Maybe I'll have a yard big enough to get it going.

Has it affected that way you cook?

What I do with the tomatoes is I can them. The first year I canned a hundred jars of tomatoes. So I can't do that much, I mean I have other stuff I have to do, but it was kind of my big thing the first year. Last year I did just 30 jars. I learned the whole canning process through growing gardens and my product turns out so well. I gave some jars away for Christmas and everybody was saying how good and fresh they were and how good it tasted. I did some jam too. I picked up some stuff at Saturday Market and made raspberry jam and blackberry jam. And I'm going to have a little more canning to do this year, obviously, because I have more tomatoes. Last year I think I only had four tomato plants. I was just waiting for the plot to open up.

What's the thought process behind the zucchini and the cucumber? Or rather the inspiration for your other vegetables...

Oh well, believe it or not, my kids and I like cucumbers a lot. I use it in a lot of different recipes so I really like to have a lot of cucumber. I like the bell pepper. I really wanted the zucchini to come up but it hasn't. I got a bunch of cheeses, I was hoping I could just bake them and throw some cheese on them and stuff. I might have put it in too deep or it was once again some of the seeds that I got this year in my little packet of seeds that they give you and I planted all the seeds they gave me. And nothing came up. So I went and bought 3 packets of the giant pumpkins, which I thought would be fun to have the 300 pound pumpkins. And the rest are the smaller ones because I'm going to make pumpkin pie throughout the fall and the winter. I love cooking so when I get the food I'm excited because I want to can it up and I want to make the fresh pies and fresh things that all my friends like.

So it has changed the way you eat? Financially? Hobby?

(15:06)It does give me pleasure and save me money. I do get more out of it. All in all, it's a fun thing to do. And I save money and I get nutritious food. So that's my story. I was just trying to make ends meet and I came into a fun thing. It all worked itself out. It makes me feel good. It's just a fun thing, great atmosphere connected all to it.

Do you trade vegetables at all?

Sometimes people will give me stuff, like cilantro. And these are very skilled gardeners as well, so they get so much out of it. I try to the stuff they do but mostly I just stick what I was taught.

How much time do you think it takes you a week?

Really once you get the initial stuff done; it's just weeding and watering. Just trying to keep up with. I probably spend about 4 to 5 hours a week in the garden.