

'Rainbow'
Swiss chard,
just picked
from a raised
bed at Hook
Mountain.

backyard **BLISS**

For this Nyack couple,
gardening isn't just a
passion; it's an obsession.

By Bill Cary

Last year's crop of heirloom tomatoes was prolific, despite the blight.



Walking around Pamela Yee and Charlie Paolino's garden is like taking a trip around the globe: Japanese and Tuscan eggplant soak in the sunshine near Thai bird chilies (they're hotter than a jalapeno but not as fiery as a habanero). Italian sweet yellow peppers bake – and thrive – near poblano peppers from Mexico. Nearby, purple-leafed mustard greens appear as happy here as they do in their native Osaka, Japan.

"I like to grow unusual things," Yee says about her exotic spread, which also includes purple sweet potatoes, Italian globe eggplant and 'Stupice' and 'Superbush' tomatoes.

The couple's garden may be rich in bounty, with a nutritional value that's off the charts, but it's also flat-out beautiful. Yellow- and red-stemmed rainbow Swiss chard catches the late-afternoon sun. 'Amethyst' basil with shiny purple-black leaves contrasts with the sunshine-yellow blooms of edible marigolds and calendula. And then, just beyond their garden is the most fortunate backdrop – on one side, the distant Hudson River; the other, a looming Hook Mountain.

It's easy to see why the couple loves to spend the bulk of their free time – even in winter – out here. And it's also easy to see why they've dubbed themselves Hook Mountain Growers. In fact, the only thing hard to believe about these particular growers, who produce 70 kinds of herbs and veg-

etables – and who often pepper their conversations with phrases like "nutritional density," "biodynamically influenced" and "seed inoculation" – is that three short years ago they knew nothing about gardening.

This spring, we caught up with the couple at their Upper Nyack home to see how their love affair with gardening began – and how it continues to grow. If you're looking for inspiration on becoming a serious suburban gardener, well, let's just say it doesn't get better than this.

ACCIDENTAL GARDENERS

Sitting in their sun-filled living room in their old-fashioned ranch home – which has been completely renovated and opened up – Paolino tells me their three French bulldogs had more than a little to do with their move

TOMATOES, BEANS: PAMELA YEE; TOP RIGHT: ANGELA GAUL



to the suburbs. Butters, Archie and Henry Hudson impatiently clamber over and around us, and I can't help but notice that Yee and Paolino seem just as antsy as their four-legged friends.

It's Friday, you see, the only weekday afternoon that finds both of them home together; both are medical doctors with private practices in New York City (Yee specializes in nutritional and holistic remedies and Paolino in HIV medicine). You can almost see the day's list of chores spinning through their heads: add compost to the outdoor beds, check on the new potato seedlings, weed the greenhouse beds, dig up a head or two of garlic for dinner.

In no time, we're heading down the hall to their seedling room, an extra bedroom where they plant their babies each year

Garlic scapes offer a bracing taste of early spring, well before the bulbs are harvested. ABOVE: "We had no idea we'd have a garden," says Charlie Paolino, with Pamela Yee.



In February, one of the bedrooms is turned into a full-scale growing space for seedlings. RIGHT: Densely planted raised beds now take up much of the former suburban backyard.

starting in February. During the spring, this room gets converted into a solar-powered factory, where 25 trays of just-sprouted seedlings sit under artificial grow lights for 16 hours a day. Paolino explains that each tray holds 40 tightly compressed blocks of soil, and each block holds a single seed, which gets hand-misted every day. Listening to them – and witnessing not only their enthusiasm but their dedication – I’m beginning to feel like I’m in the presence of two mad scientists.

At the end of the hallway, just past the master bedroom, a door opens – no, not into another bedroom – into their home-made greenhouse. They heat it with a simple fan that pulls warm air from the basement, so the temperature never drops below 42 degrees. The three raised beds inside produce fresh lettuces and other tender greens – even on the coldest winter days in January and February.

Exotic vegetables are growing in here, too. I notice a pot of lemon grass. And Yee pulls off a sprig of Vietnamese cilantro for me to taste – slightly bitter, but citrusy and delicious. A desire to eat good fresh food, I learn, helped spawn their initial interest in gardening.

“We wanted a few cooking herbs,” Paolino remembers.

“Then we took a seed-starting class at Stone Barns,” Yee adds.

“Then it just exploded,” Paolino laughs. The seed class led to a seminar on how to grow food in raised beds (also at Stone Barns). James Carr, the local garden designer who taught both classes, “made it all seem very easy,” Yee says. “Then it sort of overtook our lives – in a good way.”

IF YOU PLANT IT ...

Last year – the first full growing season – their mini-farm produced “1,300 pounds of vegetables, even with the blight,” says Paolino, referring to the devastating fungus known as late blight that thrived in last summer’s cool, damp weather. “Two years ago we knew nothing,” he says. “Now we could give talks.”

To extend the eating season, they’ve converted a crawl space into a root cellar of sorts, perfect for winter storage of potatoes, Chinese winter melon, celeriac, onions and butternut squash. Even well into April, they were still foraging last summer’s peppers and tomatoes from the basement freezer. (Freeze them whole, Yee advises.)

Back outside in the garden, they lead me away from the hilltop planting beds and past the grove of locust trees to point out future growing spaces. Though there’s only an acre of land, the couple has found room for everything.

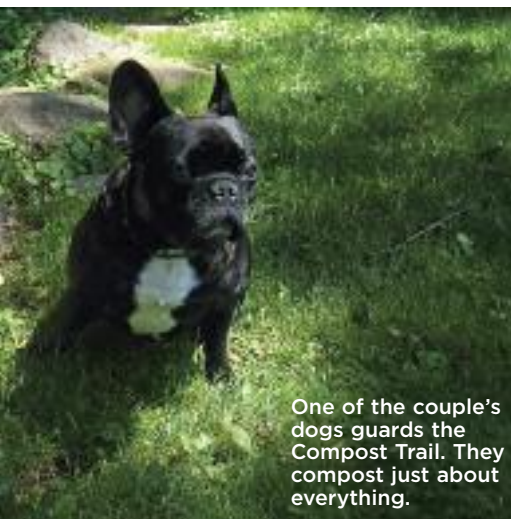
Here’s where the blackberries, raspberries and currants will go, Yee explains, pointing to a sunny patch near the salt-water swimming pool. The shady corner across from the compost bins will hold mushrooms. The spot next to the driveway? It’s reserved for chickens. Even bees will have a new place to call home in 2012. The sideyard near the driveway will become an orchard of fruit trees.

And what about the cows, hogs and horses that you’d expect in a place casually referred to as Hook Mountain farm? I turn to ask Paolino. But alas, I’m too late: He’s already behind the wheelbarrow heading for one of the beds.





GARDEN, DOG: PAMELA YEE; TOP LEFT: ANGELA GAUL



One of the couple's dogs guards the Compost Trail. They compost just about everything.

The Fight Against Late Blight

Last year, like so many gardeners in the Northeast, Charlie Paolino and Pamela Yee lost most of their tomato plants to a devastating fungus called late blight. "It was so sad," Paolino remembers. "They were 5 feet tall and loaded with fruit." What does that mean for your garden this year? Here's what you need to know.

- Don't plant tomatoes or potatoes in the same soil as last year. Rotating all vegetable crops is considered smart horticulturally, particularly with vegetables in the nightshade family (tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and peppers). Your soil could be infected with diseases like late blight.
- Look for tomato varieties known to be resistant to late blight. This year, Yee and Paolino are excited to grow 'Plum Regal,' 'Mountain Magic,' 'Legend' and 'Fantasio.'
- Look for late blight symptoms. If you see nickel- to quarter-sized lesions that are olive-green or brown and look wet, destroy that particular plant.

For more on Hook Mountain Growers, visit hookmountaingrowers.com.