

How does his garden grow?

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Belgium man uses square-foot plots without soil for green-thumb bounty

Avid landscaper and gardener Don Gotcher has two 4-foot-by-4-foot raised vegetable beds tucked in a corner of the back yard of his Belgium home that are lush with produce. Lettuce, kohlrabi, beets, sweet peas, green beans, three varieties of tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots grow in the small space.



Don Gotcher in his no-soil vegetable garden.

Photo by Sam Aronson. Not a speck of soil is in the garden and hardly a weed.

“All soil, even the cleanest soil, has weed seeds,” Gotcher said.

For the past four years, Gotcher and his wife Margaret have embraced square-foot-gardening using a mixture of perlite, a volcanic glass, and vermiculite, a rock mineral, instead of dirt to grow their veggies.

The couple had a large traditional vegetable garden at their previous home in Elkhorn, but switched to the new method after reading “All New Square Foot Gardening: Grow More in Less Space” by Mel Bartholomew.

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“We both read it and decided that was the way to go here,” Gotcher said.

Their son in Waterford and a sister-in-law in Crivitz are now also avid square-foot gardeners.

Vermiculite retains moisture, while perlite allows the water to drain, Gotcher said. His 10-inch-deep beds are set over four inches of sand.

“It’s impossible to over water it,” Gotcher said. “Being above the ground, this (mixture) warms up a lot quicker than soil does.”

Gotcher said he adds compost — sheep manure, mushroom compost, worm casings or Dr. Dom’s compost mix — every year to provide nutrients.

Each bed has a string grid delineating 16 one-foot-square plots. Gotcher could plant 32 varieties of vegetables, but he uses two or three plots for favorite crops, such as kohlrabi and beets.

The beds are about two feet apart so he and his wife can easily reach into the gardens without stepping on plants or disturbing the growing mixture.

“I’m getting more from this garden than a traditional garden and in a lot less space,” Gotcher said. “Cucumbers normally take up a large space. Here they grow up rather than out. Peas and beans also grow up.

“Everything, except the tomatoes and kohlrabi, was grown from seed.”

He and his wife use rainwater collected in rain barrels connected to downspouts to water outdoor and indoor plants.

“Rainwater is better for gardens than tap water,” he said.

Gotcher has grown vegetables since he was a kid helping his parents and grandparents with their gardens. His wife also is an avid gardener, but she prefers growing flowers to vegetables.

At age 55, Gotcher lost his maintenance job when the company he worked for downsized.

“My kids said, ‘Why don’t you go to school for something you really want to do?’” Gotcher said. “Landscaping was the first thing I thought of. I had been doing it for years and thought I should go to school to find out what I was doing wrong.

“A lot of it I was doing right. Some of it was wrong. The biggest thing I learned is the right plant in the right place.”

Earning an associate degree in horticulture and landscaping, Gotcher learned what individual plants need and why and how to doctor damaged shrubs and trees.

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Gotcher worked for five landscaping companies until he got what he considers the ideal semi-retirement job.

He is a seasonal maintenance employee from April to October at Harrington Beach State Park in the Town of Belgium.

He works full time in early spring to get the park and campground ready for the season, then reduces his schedule to four days a week through October.

He's free to travel or do odd jobs from November through March.

"That's when I play. I spend a lot of time at Harrington in winter snowshoeing with Max (his dog)," Gotcher said.

When he purchased his Belgium home five years ago, only arbor vitae and spirea had been planted. Now, flowers, grasses, shrubs and trees, including Arctic willows, river birches, dappled willows, climbing hydrangeas and flowering crabs, can be found. He chooses plants that attract birds, including hummingbirds, butterflies and bees.

His back yard, which slopes toward the house, used to have standing water that reached his dog's chest. Gotcher worked with Nate's Landscaping in Belgium to install drain tiles to direct stormwater to a rain garden filled with water-gobbling plants.

His goal is add more gardens and extend the ones already planted, leaving little grass to mow.

"I'm not a lover of lawns. It's a waste of time and energy," Gotcher said.

The avid gardener believes everyone should grow some of the food they eat because it tastes better, is more nutritious and there is less chance of contamination.

Gardening is good for the body and soul, he said.

To that end, Gotcher has developed a community garden near the village's north water tower at 946 Jer-Mar Rd. Village crews worked up the soil and fertilized it, but so far no one has requested a plot.

The community garden was first announced in the village's June newsletter.

"People may think it's too late to plant anything, but there are a lot of crops that can still be planted, such as green peppers and beans," Gotcher said. "Lettuce can be planted until the first frost, and I just put in a second crop of onions."

He plans to start a compost area near the garden and will have barrels to collect rainwater. Village water is also available at the site.

"I want it to be a place where you can meet your neighbors, where people help each other," he

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said. "It would be great for grandparents and grandchildren to work together."

To learn more about the community garden, call Gotcher at (262) 476-5019.