

## [My crash course in subsistence gardening bears fruit](#)

October 3, 2011. 8:25 am • Section: [The Green Man](#)



Posted by: The Green Man



### THE GREEN MAN

Randy Shore gets back to basics, grows his own food, and cooks up a storm.

[rshore@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:rshore@vancouver.sun.com)

The challenge of eating what I grow 12 months of the year has been an education and a revelation

The notion of living off the land is a romantic one, an idea that appeals to my usually well-concealed idealistic side.

Planting seeds, nurturing plants and eating only what the soil and sun produce. Going “off the grid.” Cocking a snook at California produce and saving untold thousands of dollars. All these things danced in my head when I set myself the challenge of eating something I grew myself every day for one year.

Alas, I am still very much on the grid. And though the fridge, the closets and the gardens are full of produce, my wife Darcy still visits the grocery store at least once in a week. (Usually without me, because I am “disruptive.”)

I knew from the outset that I could not produce all of our vegetables for the year from a standing start. I did not have winter crops planted, except some parsley and turnips. I did not have hundreds of pounds of potatoes and onions in the cellar, though I am much closer to that goal one year later.

I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Um, well, enough said.

So I determined that I would produce enough that I — actually, my little nuclear family of four — could eat at least one thing that I grew 365 days in a row. It's easy enough to do during the summer and even for the early autumn. But when the dark cold days of January, February and March roll around coaxing something edible from dirt can be a challenge.

Selling it to your family as food, even tougher. ([This recipe for roasted tomato sauce is not.](#))

It was a steep learning curve, full of surprising successes and confusing failures.

Though my genealogical research suggests that I come from at least five generations of Canadian farmers, I have never lived on a farm. My father grew up on a farm, but left to pursue a variety of careers, eventually settling in as a high school teacher far from the green acres of his youth. The generational knowledge of farming he surely possessed was not passed down.

When my radishes sprouted then withered, I had no idea why. When my potatoes emerged from the earth looking leprous and scabby, I was crestfallen and no wiser.

I suck at growing carrots, though the poor rainforest soil could be a factor.

So I hit the books. Gardening books, winter cropping books, sustainable living books. I have them all. They all contain valuable tips, but none has all the answers and few are organized in such a way that I could easily tease out the information I needed.

Gardening authors usually start with the assumption that you have soil. I have rocks. Very small rocks, but rocks nonetheless.

Every crop failure sparked an intense period of study.

Every trip to the garden spurred me to compost even more furiously. I now maintain five composts.

I made a few substantial purchases. A greenhouse kit, a leaf shredder and a rototiller with a total cost of about \$3,000. I don't regret any of them.

The greenhouse has been shockingly productive. It should pay for itself on the tomatoes alone in four years.

My greenhouse supplier told me that just five years ago more than 80 per cent of greenhouse buyers were only interested in growing flowers. Today 80 per cent of inquiries from buyers are about growing food.

Between October 2010 and April 2011, I harvested lettuce, parsley, spinach and cilantro almost daily from my greenhouse. By planting my own bedding plants and nurturing them in the greenhouse early this spring, I saved a load of cash and started eating tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower and other assorted greens weeks or months earlier than my neighbours. The early harvest allowed me to plant second crops of peas, beans, spinach, chard, kale AND to start my winter garden weeks earlier than last year, taking advantage of a nice run of warm September weather. Napa cabbage, Romaine, turnips, green onions, spinach and tat soi are all well-established for the winter. I pick radishes daily, even now.

At this writing, there are still tomatoes, basil, poblano peppers, green and red bell peppers and Thai Dragon chilies thriving in the greenhouse. Pots of arugula, parsley, scallions and cilantro are just sprouting. ([You can use spinach and arugula in this great meatloaf recipe.](#))

While the field tomato crop this year was disappointing (thank you very much for nothing, July), we have frozen some sauce tomatoes and put up a good supply of frozen green beans. On the canning side, we did a couple of batches of bread and butter pickles — a new family favourite — and our first pickled beets. Last year's dills are still in good supply.

The closets are full of storage onions and potatoes, baskets in the kitchen are brimming with garlic, shallots and hot peppers. ([The cabbage in the garden is just waiting to be turned into these delicious cabbage rolls.](#))

But there were as many failures as successes. A cold snap last year took out my winter beets and turnips. I failed several times to grow radishes, before divining the secret. (Email me if you want it.)

For every hard-to-manage bit of ground in your yard, there is a protected corner, sunny spot or shady microclimate waiting to be exploited with a pot of soil and a few seeds. If you can find those secret spots, you can use them, usually year round.

Growing food has been delicious, rewarding, discouraging, heartbreaking and the best thing I do all day. Preserving, processing, picking, cooking and eating what we grow, my wife and I do together every day.

Figuring out what to do with it all is a daily topic for conversation for the family. New recipes were invented. Old recipes were resurrected. A few favourites were rewritten to use whatever was in abundance that day.

The most important thing I learned is that if you want to eat every day, plant every day. Food grows in the ground and in boxes, in pots, under glass and in jars on the kitchen counter.

A seed can return thousands of times its weight in healthy food. All you have to do is take a few minutes — less than the duration of a TV rerun — to help it along.