

CHICAGROWS

PORTRAIT OF AN ENCHANTED GARDENER

BY SUSAN OH

As a child, Jeanne Pinosof Nolan recalls gravitating to the recesses of a family friend's garden while growing up along the North Shore. Even as a seven year old, sitting alone and eating peas in the foliage, she knew she was in her element. "I'd love to go and sit in it, just surrounded. I just liked the feeling of being lost in the garden," says



Jeanne, her elfin features framed by a disheveled pixie cut, her arms circling wide to emphasize the completeness of her enclosure.

It could be said that Chicagoland's most recognized organic gardener never came out from under the garden's thrall. She is perhaps best known for her ground-breaking urban gardens that bear food and flower into artisan statements, though much of her work is for private homes. She keeps in touch with legendary chef Alice Waters, who visited the 5,000 square-foot Edible Gardens Jeanne built and maintains for Green City Market in the Lincoln Park Zoo. Now in its fifth year, it recently expanded its program to teach more school children about where food comes from.

The stylishly sustainable rooftop garden lounge at the Uncommon Ground restaurant in Rogers Park, another one of her creations, is among the country's first that is certified organic. Jeanne is also seeding a book proposal with a literary agent in New York who rang after seeing her in *Shape*, a magazine that gave her a 2009 Green Living Award.

Long before organic gardening blogs abounded and a vegetable patch came to the White House, an 18-year old Jeanne left her comfortable home in Winnetka for a year of soul-searching in Arizona. She says, "I was shedding the Jeanne I was raised to be." That Jeanne was "a very, very good girl... on track to lead a successful mainstream life." But in 1987, in an Arizona grocery store, she came across a bag of apples that changed her life. It was labeled "organic," a term she didn't know. When she asked what that was, the answer floored her, as she recalls. "You're telling me that everything I've ever eaten in my life has chemicals in it?" From that moment, she knew she wanted to grow food and lead a simpler life. It was an environmental awakening.

The following year, Jeanne began her path to an "ecologically extreme lifestyle" with the help of her mother, who helped her secure an apprenticeship on a farm in Southern California. She would stay for five years, perfecting the growing techniques she uses to this day. Life was physically demanding, moving from farm to farm, from California to Texas and North Carolina, at one time living in a house built from recycled materials. Composting toilets were the norm.

Photographs courtesy of Jeanne Pinosof Nolan, borage blossom above by Carole Topalian



“Over the course of 17 years I would live on three different farms and each had a different soil, each had a different climate, and each was in a different part of the country, but the organic gardening principles stayed the same,” says Jeanne.

By 2004, with a two-and-a-half year old daughter, Thea, now aged seven, Jeanne faced a difficult decision. “My life had been focused on changing the world and my personal idealism, but now the focus had shifted to raising my daughter and to what would be best for her.” She decided to move back to Winnetka to be closer to her family.

Back home at her parents’ house, the first thing she did was put in a vegetable garden to cope with her awkward transition from farm life to one in the suburbs. It was a neat patch, lined with heirloom tomatoes, butternut squash, snap peas and lettuce and, unexpectedly, exquisitely helmed by giant blooms of Mammoth sunflowers. When a friend saw it, she prophetically said, “You have to start a business. Other people are going to want this.”

Jeanne’s cell phone chirps non-stop these days (the cricket-like ring tone she’s chosen is less disruptive when working in the garden). Her business, The Organic Gardener, is based out of the historic house—the last David Adler in existence in their village—Jeanne, her husband and their two young daughters share in Glencoe, north of Chicago, not far from where she grew up. It’s a charming gingerbread of a house, reminiscent of a favorite children’s book, overlooking a 6,300 square-foot garden hemmed by a white, split rail fence.

“My whole life, I’m looking to feel connected to the pulse of life. Some people get that feeling in church. I feel like I’m in my place

JEANNE’S PLANTING TIPS

Be adventurous. Try something new each year. A few options we grow at Edible Gardens include the following:

- Dry Beans: pinto, kidney, or one of the hundreds of other unique and often heirloom varieties.
- Okra: red or green. Surprisingly, this vegetable has one of the most gorgeous flowers you will find in the garden.
- Red Noodle Bean. This “yardlong” red pole bean is delicious and fun to grow.

RECOMMENDED VEGETABLES

Tomatoes (my favorite is Sungold, yellow/orange cherry; very sweet and prolific) • eggplant • edamame • snap peas • snap beans (tri-color mix green, purple, yellow, beans) • kale • chard (bright lights) • arugula • lettuce • spinach • cucumbers • peppers (sweet and hot) • basil • parsley (many other herbs) • radish (French

Breakfast, all types) • potatoes (red, blue, Yukon gold, all types).

RECOMMENDED FLOWERS

- Sunflowers: all shapes and sizes. I love the mammoth dwarf and Moulin rouge (red).
- Morning Glories: My favorite is an old fashioned mix or blue.
- Zinnias: like giant ones, bright colors.
- Nasturtium: I like climbing and variegated which are also edible and add nice color to salads.

SEEDING

Save your own seeds. This is especially fun to do with kids and is a wonderful opportunity for teaching them about the cycle of life. A few easy seeds to save: scarlet runner beans, (the seed is a gorgeous black/purple pattern), purple hyacinth bean and all other types of beans (edamame, string, peas).

when I’m in the garden,” she says, adding, “I’m never thinking that there is something more important I can be doing, especially when I’m teaching kids.”

After her success last summer raising tomatoes in an urban environment, this year Susan Oh will attempt basic carpentry to build planters where the sun hits her balcony for six to eight hours a day. In between honing her gardening skills, she is also working on documentaries for Chicago Public Radio.