

HAPPY FOREVER COMMUNITY GARDENER GETS EDUCATED

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SIMONA CARINI

Hello, I am Simona, founder and CEO of Slugs 'n' Snails Xpress, Inc. Our company relocates personae non gratae (a.k.a. pests) from vegetable gardens to outworld destinations: hop on board this comfortable bag, sit down, relax, and enjoy your flight.



That's me, talking to a slug while getting rid of it. I don't have much choice: I need to defend my seedlings from the hordes of slimy critters that, under cover of darkness, descend upon my hapless plants and digest their leaves. Going out on slug and snail patrol after dark allows me to stop them dead in their tracks. Also, slugs and snails like dark and damp spots, so I have scattered a few traps around my tiny beginner's garden: a couple of upside-down flowerpots, a wooden board, a brick. Early or late in the day, I check the traps, remove all residents, and dispose of them.

If you've been reading the ongoing tales of the Happy Forever Community Garden in *Edible East Bay*, you might recall that I got into gardening by helping Rachel, the energetic organizer behind our neighborhood vegetable oasis. Now I have a tiny vegetable plot of my own, where the quandaries of plant and pest management are entirely mine to bear. Fortunately, I found help. It arrived a year ago, via snail mail, appropriately. The leaflet, entitled "Bay-Friendly Gardening: Free Workshops Spring 2007," seemed to know that I would be receptive to its message.

Bay-friendly Gardening Workshops

The leaflet directed me to www.BayFriendly.org, where I discovered that Bay-Friendly Gardening is a program of StopWaste.Org, a public agency whose mission is to reduce the waste stream in Alameda County. The program encourages residents to make environmentally friendly gardening and landscaping choices. As the website explains, "Bay-Friendly Gardeners work with nature to reduce waste, conserve resources and protect the watersheds of San Francisco Bay."

Starting my formal education with Bay-Friendly Gardening Basics, I was introduced to three important topics: soil types, plant

selection, and pest management. As a member of a team, I contributed to the design of a vegetable garden while applying the principles of Bay-Friendly Gardening, which meant including a compost bin and choosing plants with an eye toward both conserving water and providing habitat for wildlife. Round two was a workshop, Creating Year-Round Edible Gardens, which focused on gardening techniques that optimize produc-

tivity, such as companion planting.

My experience with the Happy Forever Community Garden has turned me into a supporter of planting more edibles in private gardens and public spaces. Based on the attendance at the workshop, it is clear that an increasing number of people are becoming interested in growing their own food. The Bay Area is ideal ground for such endeavors, since we can grow vegetables year-round. However, starting a garden from scratch is a daunting task, therefore I focused on a small space and limited my plan to a few plants. My main goal was to acquire experience, not to make the family self-sufficient in terms of food. The workshops had left me with a bit of information overload, but, magically, many details came back to me at the right moments. I loved the broccoli we harvested from the Happy Forever Community Garden last winter, so when I saw a six-pack of seedlings, I could not resist. Is there such a thing as compulsive plant-purchase syndrome? If there is, then I have it. The seller made me notice that each section had two plants, which I could gently pry apart before placing in their new space. As I was preparing my seedlings' permanent homes, I remembered to leave enough room for each one, keeping in mind not the plants as I saw them, but as they would be when they grew up. Later on, I saw that each of my broccoli had plenty of room to stretch its leaves.

Creatures Small and Not

I find the development of seeds or seedlings into full fruiting plants an intriguing show. What could be more exciting than watching zucchini or other squash grow at the base of female flowers, while the male flowers go on being just flowers? There are many reasons to plant zucchini, the harvest of delicate and delicious blossoms

being one of them. When I planted my first seedling, I was really excited: A film footage of risotto with blossoms, frittata, and herbed zucchini played repeatedly in the movie theater of my imagination, with the protagonist of each episode coming from my garden. In the evening, I went to check my future movie star factory and on one of its leaves I found a giant slug eating away at my dreams of endless delicacies. “How dare you?” I asked the destroyer. That seminal moment marked the founding of Slugs ’n’ Snails Xpress, Inc.



Besides gliding pests, there are flying ones. Although only five percent of the insects in our gardens are actually pests, we see clearly the damage that small percent does to our plants. I was glad to find out that I have some yarrow in my garden. Besides being a lovely plant with small flowers and lacy leaves, it attracts a number of beneficial insects. One of the most fascinating pieces of information from both the Basics and the Gardening to Manage Pests Naturally workshops was that I could encourage the well-known ladybug, as well as many previously unknown-to-me beneficial insects to take residence in my garden as a way of controlling bad

bugs. Controlling is the key word here, since we cannot expect to eliminate pests completely: that would actually create an imbalance in the ecosystem of the garden.

While equilibrium seemed possible with the small critters in my garden, unbalanced displeasure was my reaction to a much bigger being, a deer who had decided that the Happy Forever Community Garden was a great place to have dinner. Throughout the summer, Rachel has seen signs of the disrespectful creature’s feasting, especially on the dwarf sunflowers I had planted along the north edge of the garden as an attraction to beneficial insects



yarrow



Italian flat-leaf parsley

and as a reminder of my home region of Umbria, where sunflowers are widely cultivated. Corn and scarlet runner beans, on the other hand, seemed to be unpalatable to our uninvited guest, which allowed some feelings of tolerance toward it, until the red kuri squash started to ripen—and to disappear. For the next phase of our beloved neighborhood garden we are planning for deer—we are including many plants that we like, but they don't.

Everywhere Parsley

I am Italian and cannot do without parsley. The herb is so ubiquitous in Italian dishes that we say *come il prezzemolo* (like parsley) of someone or something that seems to be always present. A gift I brought home from the Edible Garden workshop was a package of parsley seeds, and as I sowed them into the ground, I thought how much better it would be not having that big bunch of parsley from the grocery store wilting in my refrigerator before I could use it all up. When I was a child, my mother would send me to the fruit and vegetable store (*il fruttivendolo*) with a shopping list that included *gli odori*, an assortment of the aromatic herbs in season. The store owner provided this item at no charge, preparing it on the fly from among what was available. The constants were a sprig of rosemary, some parsley, some sage, and a celery rib with its leaves, while other components varied depending on the season. The small quantity of each item insured immediate use and prevented wasteful wilting.

I sowed the parsley seeds according to the instructions printed on the package, but forgot to read about germination time before discarding it. So I waited and waited and despaired, and finally gave up and bought a seedling. Soon after I planted the latter, I noticed a hint of green in the area where I had scattered the seeds, but I thought it was just wishful thinking. Well, it wasn't: it was parsley. I just needed to wait a bit longer. I later read that parsley seeds take up to six weeks to germinate. The seeds are coated with furanocoumarins, substances that delay other seeds' germination, providing a competitive advantage to parsley. However, until the

seeds have been exposed to sufficient moisture, the furanocoumarins prevent even the parsley seeds themselves from germinating. Soaking the seeds overnight before sowing them will shorten the germination period.

Join the Party

If my adventures inspire you to participate in one or more of the Bay-Friendly Gardening workshops, check the website for the publication of the calendar. The 2008 spring series begins on Saturday, March 8, but online registration starts in early February. My suggestion is to register early, since the workshops are very popular. Since the workshop series started in spring 2004, nearly 2,000 people have participated. Thirty percent of participants have attended two or more workshops (this portion of the pie includes me). Over 70 percent self-identify as beginner gardeners, which means the workshops are affecting a new generation of green thumb debutantes.

For more inspiration, Bay-Friendly Gardening organize a yearly tour showcasing Bay-friendly gardens. These include native, edible, children's gardens, and more, demonstrating how the Bay-Friendly Gardening approach can be applied to a wide variety of gardening styles. This year's tour is scheduled for Sunday, April 27, 2008.

As a final assessment of my first season of solo gardening, I would say that information from the Bay-Friendly Gardening workshops, experience from both the Happy Forever Community Garden and the workshops, and some tips from nursery personnel have all contributed to what I consider a flattering success. The Chinese proverb referred to in the name of our community garden tells us that "if you want to be happy forever, plant a garden." Well, forever is a big word, but I can attest that my small endeavor has made me happy for several months.

Special thanks to Jeanne Nader, StopWaste.Org's program manager, for kindly answering my questions and providing information.

A native of Italy, Simona moved to the Bay Area in 1993 to live with her (now) husband. She works part-time as a researcher, writes a food-related audioblog (briciole.typepad.com) and helps her husband run the small non-profit he founded in 2006.

SPAGHETTI COL TONNO

(pasta with tomato and tuna sauce, or how to use the parsley)

½ – 1 tablespoon olive oil

3 cloves of garlic, peeled

1 15-oz. can of organic tomato sauce

½ tablespoon anchovy paste (optional)

1 7.5 oz. can of tuna (low or minimal mercury, packed in its own juices)

1 lb. spaghetti

¼-cup minced fresh parsley

Put a large pot of water on to boil. Meanwhile pour the olive oil into a small saucepan and warm over very low heat. Add the garlic and let the oil absorb the garlic's flavor for a few minutes. The cloves will darken in color, but they must not become dark brown.

Add the anchovy paste, if using, stirring it into the oil. Then add the tomato sauce and warm the mixture slowly to a simmer. Cover and allow the sauce to cook for 5 minutes.

Open the can of tuna and pour its contents into a small bowl. Flake the tuna with a fork and mix to stir the juices back in, then pour into the simmering tomato sauce. Stir well, then cover the pan and let the sauce simmer for 10 minutes.

When the water is boiling, add spaghetti and cook until al dente.

When the sauce is ready, add the parsley, turn off the heat, mix well, adjust the salt, and cover again.

Drain the spaghetti and place in a serving bowl. Pour the sauce over and toss. Remove the garlic cloves and serve immediately.

Serves 4–6

