

An Eggplant

Fresh, delicious living takes root in Steve and Alex Cerilli's **ROOFTOP GARDEN.**

By Rachel Carter

FOURTEEN PLASTIC CONTAINERS BURSTING WITH KALE, tomatoes, zucchini, squash, Swiss chard, cucumbers, bell and jalapeño peppers, herbs and eggplant soak up the heat rising from the rubber blacktop on Steve and Alexandra Cerilli's roof. The couple first planted the seeds in September 2007; a month later, they had a boom bloom, followed by a bumper crop of self-grown produce and herbs that would find its way into ratatouilles, salads and sandwiches for months to come. Container gardening, the practice of growing vegetables, flowers and herbs in the available crannies of a crowded metropolitan area, is a viable way to save money, "green" a city space and, for the Cerillis, teach Newport about investing in a sustainable lifestyle that tries to decrease the demand at the market for out-of-season, imported fruits and vegetables.

"It's not about deciding what you want to eat and then buying it at the grocery store," says Alex, who works at The Mooring Seafood Kitchen and Bar. "It's about eating what's in season." Glancing out of the window at the roof deck, she adds, "And it is so much more satisfying to grow your own vegetables."

The Cerillis live in a third floor nook in a building that they own on Marlborough Street, a vertical spot on

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Grows in Newport



Photography by Steve and Alex Cerilli

ABOVE Steve Cerilli assembles the Earthbox, sits back and watches the Swiss chard bloom.

*"If you get even a little patch of sunlight,
you can put a box there and grow something."*

-STEVE CERILLI

the map that has no land for rows and rows of green corn and cabbage. Newport is old and Colonial; the slim lanes perpendicular to Thames Street, like the alleys surrounding Marlborough, are an unlikely locale for full-on gardening. But a lack of space inherent to city living is the magic of urban gardening and, specifically, container gardening – the magic lies in working with the space that you have to create something beautiful, edible and oxygen-productive.

HOW THEY GROW

When the Cerillis decided to garden on their roof deck, Steve, who founded 105.9 Radio Newport, discovered a company called Earthbox, which sells organic, grow-it-yourself kits that include everything a rookie gardener needs for a hearty crop of butternut squash – or anything you like. Once the container is assembled, a sheet of black plastic with cut holes covers the container and allows the seeds to grow comfortably through the holes while soaking up water and fertilizer. The only job the gardener has to

do is water the container regularly through the fill tube. According to Steve, the Earthbox eliminates the fear of over watering because the peat-based potting mix absorbs what it needs and then discharges the excess clean water, instead of dirty runoff. "It really is foolproof," Alex says. "The first year we did it, we had so many eggplants."

The Cerillis' rooftop has become a pseudo-test garden for Earthbox, dubbed the "community garden project of Radio Newport;" Molly Philbin, education director for Earthbox, traded Steve free containers, which cost about \$60 per kit, for twice-a-day promotion on Radio Newport for eight months, with a link to photo galleries of his potted growth on a Google Base site that links to Radio Newport's web site. At the same time Steve discovered Earthbox, he found a business called the Great American Rain Barrel Company, out of Hyde Park, Massachusetts, that recycles 60-gallon olive barrels into rainwater collection containers. The clincher: Suzanne and George Gebelein, founders of Great American Rain Barrel Company, also own Orleans Packing, a Mediterranean specialty food importing and

The Cerillis water their container garden with rain water collected in recycled kalamata olive barrels.



Courtesy of Northwestern University Library

PLANT A VICTORY GARDEN



OUR FOOD IS FIGHTING

A GARDEN WILL MAKE YOUR RATIONS GO FURTHER

packing company. Suzanne donated three Great American Rain Barrels for the Cerillis' container garden; Steve then dually promoted the Great American Rain Barrels and the Earthboxes on radio spots, called "Rainwater to Food Initiative," in 2008.

The Radio Newport community garden project has seen Edenesque success with the Earthbox, but Steve is quick to point out that you can use any kind of container, including terra cotta or plain old plastic, to create your own urban garden. Dozens of other companies would no doubt be thrilled to sell you a rain barrel or five – though scant kalamata olive containers.

WAR AND PEAS

Urban dwellers have found creative ways to use scarce city dirt for generations, through shared space in the community gardens of large, central parks (Boston Common, shared plots in the South End of Boston, and Central Park in NYC) and small, neighborhood plots (The Southside Community Land Trust in Providence has a lovely, self-sustaining city farm share using organic techniques) in space-starved cities. Patriots supported Allied efforts during World War II by planting "victory gardens," plots of vegetables and herbs in their own backyards to ease some of the pressure on public demand for food and, in turn, lower the prices so that troops abroad would have enough to eat. One U.S. wartime poster, showing a family in overalls gathering a bushel of their victory garden produce, cheers, "Plant a Victory Garden. Our food is fighting. A garden will make your rations go further." (For more information on locally grown food, see story on page 32).

Relieving the demand for out-of-season fruits and vegetables (blueberries in December, tomatoes in February) by taking full advantage of the growing season when it arrives and growing your own is a victory for Alex, Steve and other home gardeners – especially during a recession, when people can save money through container gardening and then share their bounty with others. Martin Van Hof, owner of Island Garden Shop in Portsmouth, predicts an increased trend toward container gardening in a worsening economy. "Given the business climate, the interest will grow," Van Hof says. "When times get tough, people are

ted in growing their

ry to its reputation, garden- and most people the time nor the ess it is container where a little long way – and in the potting g your dinner re at the office. es, with a bit of u just water it f you get even ea of sunlight,

you can put a box there and grow

something."

Steve and Alex have 14 containers all growing at once, but if you are new to container gardening, Alex suggests starting out with a combination that you love, like tomatoes and basil, or zucchini and squash. "Grow something that you aren't going to get sick of eating," she advises.

Steve's goal for 2009 is to "green" 50 brown spaces, or areas in the city with no plant life. Two Broadway businesses, Salvation Café and Bliss Natural Grocer and Café, are already on board. Bliss has maintained a lush container garden on its outdoor patio since 2006, growing rabe, 12 ears of corn in one box, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and even artichokes. Alex Hart Nibbrig, co-owner and chef at Bliss, chops up the organic nosh for some of his dishes, but admits that the plants don't take the place of trips to the market and are intended, instead, to show Newportants what they can do with a small space. "It is great for people who want to get into gardening, instead of tilling their yards," he says. "I mean, why not buy three or four and grow your own vegetables?" (See more about Nibbrig on page 56.)

So if you happen to walk down Marlborough Street this spring, look up. You might see banana-like Swiss chard leaves wiggling in the salty breeze, or the heads of Echinacea flowers bowing hello from the Cerillis' roof. And if you see Steve and Alex tending their plants, ask them to show you their prized plant, a

fieri Mexican sunflower flaunting its beauty among the kale. Even in the middle of a garden, the red flower is worth notice and adds a spike of color to the already bonny army of leafy greens. 🌻

