

URBAN GARDENING COOP STYLE

April 30, 2024



By Juliet Kleber

Spring has sprung—plants and seeds have begun to appear in the aisles of the Coop, and I know I’m not the only member with a small, rented or unconventional outdoor space. So I spoke with the Coop’s seed buyer, Cecelia Rembert, about the plants the Coop offers and the ways they take the particularities of small spaces and urban gardeners into consideration.

Five years ago, I learned to garden in a rundown Williamsburg backyard shared with six of my neighbors. The other tenants had mostly given up on the mosquito-ridden space, full of trash and ivy that had been growing uninhibited for years. I cut back

that ivy, cleared out the broken-down shed that was rotting underneath it, and hauled it out to the street bit by bit in black contractor bags. I amended the soil with compost and pulled out bricks, chunks of concrete and ancient garbage. I re-paved the stone path that cut through the center of the yard and threw down grass and wildflower seed that flourished into a lush half-lawn, half-meadow.

While it grew, I brought in big felt raised beds, and I planted tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and leafy greens. I set up an arched trellis over the path and planted sugar snap peas in a crate at each side. I enjoyed (almost) every minute of it, and gardening became one of my great loves. The neighbors I shared it with began to come out and enjoy it more. I threw cookouts and birthday parties and read for hours in the sun, especially in the worst days of COVID.

And then I moved and left it all. I was ready to move in with my partner, and though I had ample outdoor space, my actual apartment was much too small for two of us and two cats. So I said goodbye to my backyard and moved into his apartment in Bed-Stuy, which came with an eight-inch deep balcony, an empty roof and an opportunity to join the Coop. I joined the ranks of many Coop members and other New Yorkers who have to find more creative ways to exercise their green thumbs in the absence of a yard.

“PEOPLE ARE GARDENING IN ALL KINDS OF CIRCUMSTANCES,” SAID REMBERT, “SOME PEOPLE HAVE BACKYARDS, SOMETIMES IT’S JUST A FEW CONTAINERS ON A FIRE ESCAPE OR THE FRONT STOOP, SOMETIMES IT’S THE TREE PITS IN FRONT OF THEIR BUILDING.”

Gardening season at the Coop begins as early as February and runs through May. Seeds are the first to arrive—both cool-weather crops like peas, kale and other leafy greens, which can be directly planted outside at the first signs of spring, and more delicate, warm-weather plants like tomatoes and other nightshades that can be started

indoors now and brought out around Mother's Day, when the nights are warmer and the plants have grown sturdy enough to withstand the elements. The Coop sources seeds from three suppliers: Fedco, a fellow cooperative that sells larger-quantity packets; Artistic Gardens, which sells a variety of affordable seeds in different quantities, including sample packs; and Hudson Valley Seed Co., which sells a wide range of flowers and edibles in small, beautifully decorated "Art Packs" likely to catch the eye of many shoppers.

By early April, the Coop had already sold thousands of seed packets this season. But there is no shortage of options when it comes to live plants either, if you don't have the time, patience, or indoor space to start with seeds. Members can grow some of the same veggies they'd buy in the produce aisle by purchasing live plants from Fresh Meadows—one of the Coop's produce suppliers. They offer herbs like rosemary, lavender, sage, chives and oregano, as well as veggies like snap peas and broccoli. Later in the season (usually around May), they'll have a variety of tomato starts and other warm-weather edibles like eggplants and peppers. Produce supplier Hepworth Farms also offers some garden-ready plants, and Myers stocks the Coop with potted bulbs.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

There are also two nurseries the Coop only works with at planting time. Starting in mid-April, Gowanus Nursery brings in a weekly delivery of annuals like nasturtiums, peas, and herbs in eco-friendly containers of coconut coir rather than plastic growers pots and packed in wooden crates that the Coop returns. “They have a beautiful mentality about conservation,” Rembert said. Glover Perennials supplies most of the Coop’s longer-lived plants, both winter-hardy edibles like blueberry and strawberry plants as well as ornamentals. And while you might recognize the green Glover logo from your local hardware store or garden center, you’ll want to snap them up at the Coop for a much better price. As Rembert told the *Gazette*, “It’s fun to be partnered with them, because we’re able to offer their perennials at a better price than you would pay if you went to a garden center... It’s been a big hit with members, because they’re able to come in here and pay \$14 for something they’d pay \$30 for at a nursery.”

EVEN WITH A BEAUTIFUL, SUNNY BROWNSTONE BACKYARD, GARDENING IN NEW YORK CITY CAN BE A CHALLENGE.

Rembert also considers other member needs, beyond affordability, when planning out the Coop's garden offerings. First, there are the realities that all New York City gardeners face: brutal summer heat, exposure to common urban pollutants like pet waste and concrete run-off and, often, poor soil quality. "Everything we get is zoned for this [climate] zone, so it should do well under these growing conditions," Rembert said, "And whenever we're faced with a choice between more delicate and hardier, we go with the hardier."

Even with a beautiful, sunny brownstone backyard, gardening in New York City can be a challenge. Overly sandy, clayey, or nutrient-poor soil can be amended with compost like the \$6 bags of BK Rot that the Coop sells. But other issues can't be as easily ameliorated. In my old backyard, for instance, all my edibles had to be grown in raised beds, because chemical testing revealed that the soil contained 1,473 parts-per-million of lead—over three times higher than the 400 ppm threshold that New York State deems unsafe for vegetable gardening. In cases like that, which are common, even a New Yorker with ample space must become a container gardener.

"People are gardening in all kinds of circumstances," said Rembert, "Some people have backyards, sometimes it's just a few containers on a fire escape or the front stoop, sometimes it's the tree pits in front of their building." In my case, it's window boxes hung on the railing of a narrow balcony and plans to haul some big planters up to the roof. But even those constrained spaces can offer more options than one might think.

The Coop's most popular garden products, according to Rembert, are herbs and tomatoes, all of which can do just fine in pots or other small containers. Some are even bred and sold with those constraints in mind—like the dwarf tomato plants from Fresh

Meadows that the Coop will have in stock in May. “They’re really great for container gardening because sometimes tomatoes get really leggy and all over the place, but these won’t overflow the space,” Rembert said.

And container gardeners can think bigger than just tomatoes and herbs for their small spaces. Peppers can flourish in relatively small pots as well, as can less common fruits and vegetables. Strawberries are a compact, hardy option that will come back every year—Artistic Garden’s Fraise de Bois alpine strawberries make a particularly good container option, as the especially sweet, tiny fruits can grow in abundance in a limited amount of soil, and the plants don’t produce fast-spreading runners like other strawberries tend to. Plus, a seed packet is only about 30 cents at the Coop.

Snap peas do well in a container too, and will grow beautifully up a railing, a fence, or just a piece of chicken wire or wooden lattice leaned up against a wall. New container gardeners might be surprised to find that larger crops can live happily in a smaller space too: “Butternut squash spread their leaves a lot, but they don’t actually need a lot of root room,” Rembert shared. “And if you have a black rubber pot or even a milk crate lined with a planter bag, they’ll absorb lots of heat which is great for things like melons—especially if you mulch with a black garbage bag.” Cucumbers, zucchini and eggplants can thrive in similar setups.

The same can be said for many of the ornamental plants stocked at the Coop—at present, you can find violas and clematis from Glover Perennials, both of which do well in containers. And Rembert makes a particular effort to stock plants native to our region, so while these plants might not feed you, they’re a much needed meal for the pollinators who make New York their home, including birds, bees and 700 types of butterflies that migrate through the area.

So for members who usually skip over the seeds and plants thinking they don’t have the space, this could be your year. Just start out with a pot of good soil, a bit of sun, and plenty of patience.

Juliet Kleber is a writer, editor, and musician based in Bed-Stuy. She joined the Coop in 2021 and always comes home with too much cheese.