

HOW COOP MEMBERS NURTURE THEIR URBAN GARDENS

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By Liora Fishman

On the first sunny day of April, as I was enjoying the warmth, it dawned on me that my favorite season was fast-approaching—not, as some might suspect, summer, but a season far more exciting: gardening season. My apartment has a narrow balcony where I use pots that hang haphazardly off the railing (facing inward, of course, to avoid garden-related hazards to pedestrians).

Every summer my little garden becomes a test kitchen of sorts, where I see exactly how much produce I can, well, *produce* courtesy of the Coop's gardening offerings. I've grown kale, basil, cherry tomatoes, peppers, cilantro and strawberries—all to

varying degrees of success.

And I'm obviously not alone. I surveyed a bunch of Coop members on how they turn the Coop's seeds, seedlings and other gardening items into sprightly spots of urban greenery.

New Yorkers have long sought to master creative gardening in cramped spaces, and as the warmth of summer approaches, there's no better time for Coop members to embark on an urban gardening adventure.



Seedlings sprout in moss-covered grow bags.

Gardening season at the Coop kicks off as early as February and extends through May, offering a diverse array of options for both seasoned gardeners (how I like to think of myself) and beginners (what I am, in reality).

The season commences with the arrival of seeds, encompassing a range of cool-weather crops like peas and kale, suitable for direct outdoor planting at the onset of spring. Additionally, delicate warm-weather plants such as tomatoes and peppers are made available for indoor cultivation, ready to be transitioned outdoors as the weather warms.

The Coop sources its seeds from three reputable suppliers: Fedco, Artistic Gardens and Hudson Valley Seed Co., ensuring a broad selection catering to various gardening preferences.

As the season progresses into April, the Coop sees a surge in seed packet sales. For those preferring live plants, an abundance of options is provided, eliminating the need for extensive indoor seed starting. (I myself have killed many a basil plant from the Coop's live plant selection.) Later in the season, a variety of tomato starts and other warm-weather edibles like eggplants and peppers become available.

Recognizing the challenges inherent in urban gardening, the Coop caters to member needs with a focus on affordability and suitability for local growing conditions. By offering plants and seeds zoned for the area's climate, the Coop is hoping to nurture gardening success, given factors like extreme summer heat and soil quality issues.



PHOTO BY John Midgley

It doesn't have to be edible to be worth growing.

Additionally, initiatives such as selling compost and partnering with environmentally conscious nurseries like Gowanus Nursery underscore the Coop's commitment to sustainability and community. Whether on a sunny brownstone balcony or a fire escape, the Coop's gardening offerings empower members to embrace gardening regardless of their space, fostering a culture of green living and self-sufficiency in an urban landscape.

For some Coop members, windowsills are transformed into miniature gardens, hosting herbs like basil and mint, ready to jazz up any dish. These herbs thrive in sunny locations, so placing pots on south-facing windowsills ensures they receive necessary natural light.

One Coop member, Rishi Shah, got particularly creative in his approach. "Starting my Coop seeds on a windowsill with a radiator has been the perfect mix of warmth and sun," he said. "After being covered in plastic wrap for a few days to trap humidity, my basil, zaatar, zinnias, and tomatoes are all germinating, waiting until it is warm enough to go in the ground." When they're ready, Shah will transfer the plants to his plot in the Prospect Heights Community Garden.

"I used to think growing from seed was impossible, but it isn't as intimidating as I once thought. Squirrels and pests remain intimidating, though," he said.



Stakes help tomatoes grow tall and thrive.

Shah feels a real affection for gardening season at the Coop.

“The Coop has a strong commitment to sustainability that makes me proud to buy most things from it, but especially plants,” Shah said. “Their focus on selecting seeds and plants that thrive in our local climate not only ensures gardening success but also aligns with my environmental values.”

He added, “The reasonable prices often lead me to buy more seeds than I initially planned.” Despite occasionally purchasing more than necessary, Shah has no regrets. “Each year, I find myself buying an abundance of seeds, and every year, it becomes a gardening adventure.”

His sentiments echoed those of many members who value the Coop’s efforts in pro-

moting sustainable and budget-friendly gardening practices.



Perennials like thyme reward gardeners year after year.

Some members said they took up gardening only because they came across the Coop's offerings.

"I probably wouldn't have taken such an interest in gardening if it weren't for the Coop's selection and prices," Brett Krasner said. When he moved to Brooklyn several years ago, plants were something for which he had fondness but little experience.

"I got so excited leafing through all of the types of seeds, imagining what would be possible to grow," he said. "Obviously, not every seed has turned into a success story, but it's given me the confidence to expand my garden each year."



A canine assistant supervises the planting.

Now, Krasner is building a garden bed on his front lawn. “I’ve only ever grown plants on windowsills, or fire escapes,” Krasner explained, “so this is definitely a larger undertaking for me.”

Krasner mentioned that this year he’s focusing on growing plants native to New York. Native plants are essential components of ecosystems, playing a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity and ecological balance.

Some examples of native plants in New York City include Eastern Butterfly Weed, a favorite of pollinators like butterflies and bees, which can be plucked from the selection of seed packages from Hudson Valley Seed Co.

“It’s important to me that my garden incorporates most—if not all—native plants,” ex-

plained Krasner, as he and I leafed through the seed packets in the Coop's produce aisle. "Native plants help support the ecosystem they are intended to be in. It feels like you're contributing to the community when you plant them."

Liora Fishman joined the Coop in December 2021. She lives in Prospect Heights and has a wonderful dog, Ollie, whom she loves very much.