HOW COOP MEMBERS NURTURE THEIR URBAN GARDENS

May 21, 2024



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.

URBAN GARDENING COOP STYLE

May 21, 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.



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-part-s-per-millions 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.

YOU GROW, GIRL!

May 21, 2024



By Liora Fishman

As a child growing up in the suburbs, gardening was a thing that my parents did for fun and a chore that I got roped into. My mom espoused the idea that there was "nothing better than the feeling of dirt beneath your fingernails." On the contrary, I'd say, as I begrudgingly de-weeded flower beds in our backyard, there were quite a few things I could think of that were better than that: clean fingernails and air condition-

ing, first and foremost.

Then the pandemic hit. I was lucky enough to find myself in an apartment with outdoor space that looked particularly lonely without the greenery my mother championed. So I bought some flower beds and soil. I planted some seedlings. I was sure that in a couple of weeks I'd have my own little urban garden. It couldn't be that hard, right?



A plant on a windowsill overlooks a city street.

I learned quite quickly that there was such a thing as too much sun for some plants—even for sun-tolerant outdoor plants. My lavender plant died within a week, though I refused to give up on it until I was quite certain I was watering decomposed leaves. For other plants, the New York sun would never be enough. After suffering a few plant losses, I decided to retroactively do some research, and learned about the importance of native plants and zone planting schedules.

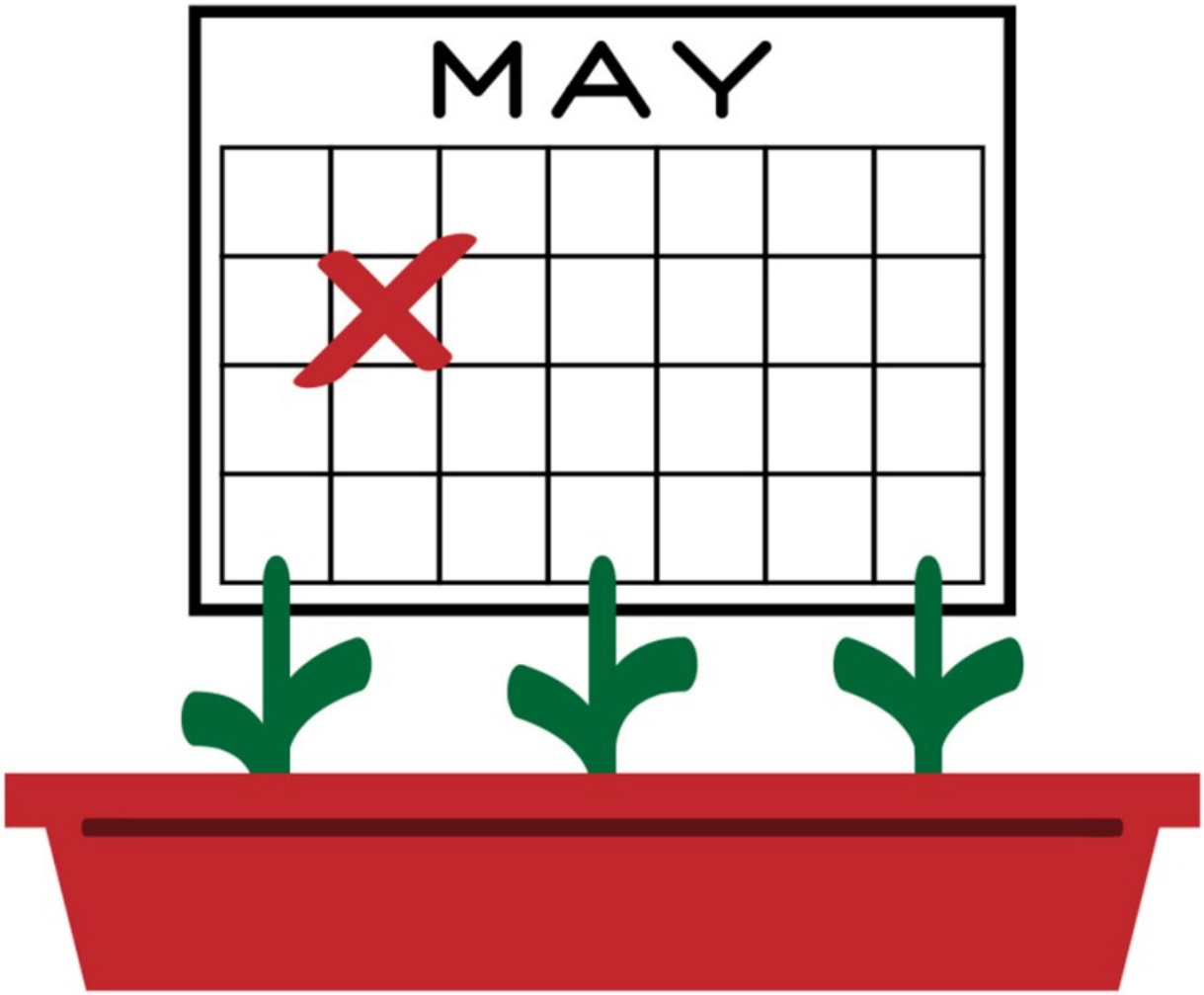


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Climate conditions are variable across the United States and there's a numerical zone system that dictates when one ought to plant, for example, squash versus broccoli. New York City is in Zone 7, meaning that most of the planting season spans May to September. Native plants are those that have, according to the National Wildlife Federation's website, "formed symbiotic relationships with native wildlife over thousands of years," and therefore offer the most sustainable habitat. "A plant is considered native if it has occurred naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction." For New Yorkers, this includes strawberries, wildflowers like milkweed, dogwood and native sunflowers.

Luckily for Coop members, the Produce team considers both the local growing zones and native plants when it curates the plant selection each season. Coop Produce Buyer Cecelia Rembert explains, "This year we added a new nursery that we worked with for our plant selections, called Glover Perennials, 'a family-run nursery specializing in plants that are native to the Northeast and perennials, based in Long Island.'"

Not only are all the plants from Glover Perennials native to the New York City area, they are also intended for long-term ownership: "Everything we got from Glover Perennials is going to come back every year—that's what a perennial is," says Rembert. "We're in Zone 7 and all of the plants we got aligned with Zone 7, too."



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

That is, of course, contingent on you being able to keep your plants alive. And if you're like me, you've already killed your tomato and basil plants. "Gardening can be a real challenge in the summer in New York," Rembert said—a validating thing for a plant-killer to hear from a produce professional.

Despite giving off an air of leisure, gardening in New York City requires quite a bit of discipline and consistency. One must always take into consideration the sun exposure

your plants are getting. And if you got your plants from the Coop this year, it's likely that they need quite a bit of sun and regular watering. "Your plants need to be watered every day," explained Rembert. "When we were ordering the plants, we tended towards getting full-sun plants—so everything that everyone purchased from the Coop is sun-tolerant," which should, one hopes, last you through those 90+ degree days of New York summer.

Unfortunately, if you missed the early, cooler days of summer and spring, you may have also missed peak planting season. While that's not to say that you shouldn't try planting some sunflower seeds, the ideal time to do so is after Mother's Day, when the nighttime temperatures are generally above 40 degrees—why the Coop only offers plants for a limited time, beginning around April and ending in mid- to late June.


PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

A pot of bright green herbs, including basil, sage, mint, thyme and lavender.
“You don’t leave anything outside overnight until after Mother’s Day in New York,” explained Rembert when asked about the timing of the Coop’s plant season. ”We do offer seeds prior to that, but the small plants will start coming in towards the end of April and can go into the ground once the nighttime temperatures are above 40 degrees.”

So what to do if you’re hoping to try your hand at plants this year? “Spring is the time that you should plant new plants. Gardeners can plant again in the fall, but we probably won’t provide any more plants in the fall,” said Rembert.

Timing the purchase of these plants can be quite tricky. The Coop works with partner farms like Glover Perennials to identify when plants have reached a stage where they haven’t quite flowered yet, but are ready to be uprooted and sold.

Given the fleeting plant season at the Coop, I asked Rembert if she could tell us some favorites we should keep an eye out for next year—or perhaps a sneak peek into next year’s plant selection. “We had really great peonies, and clematis. Clematis is one of my favorites that we offered,” said Rembert, referring to a lesser-known, purple flowering vine.



Sunlight shines through the leaves of a small potted plant.

And while the Coop will continue to prioritize native plants, you may see fewer florals next year. “We were a little heavy-handed with the native flowers, like meadow flowers, and that was a learning experience,” Rembert reflected.

But some things will never change: herb garden staples like basil and cilantro will return each year, and in fact, can be grown in the same pot if you’d like all your cooking herbs in one place. Rembert herself says, “It’s nice to have a selection of herbs—I grow them all in the same pot, and they come back every year. I’ll snip them as I’m cooking.”

While this year’s growing season has certainly been a tumultuous one for me (Rest in Peace, My Basil Plant, early June 2022 to mid-June 2022), Rembert left me feeling armed with the knowledge to succeed next year, and make do with what I haven’t killed for the remainder of the summertime.

Here’s the thing: whether or not I excel at it, I actually *enjoy* gardening and intend to continue doing just that. Come spring, you’ll find me immersed in the plant selection of the Coop, while Googling just how difficult it is to kill whatever plant is in stock that week.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

In a time when our phones demand more attention than the outdoors do, it’s refreshing to have a project that requires patience and consistency. Planting and growing a

garden lacks the instant gratification of social media and requires a kind of jovial discipline and commitment that’s become harder and harder to come by. This, of course, means that I have to speak the words that just about anyone with parents is loath to say: my mom was right.

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