

Dear Kitchen Gardener,

Earlier this summer, Roger asked me to write something "short" about my own path to the kitchen garden.

Well, it's been a long path in fact, beginning at age two planting corn in the family victory garden using a piece of string with two knots to measure the distance between seeds. Then there were no gardens in my life for many years, not counting a miserably failed attempt in the rubble strewn lot next to the apartment building in which I lived when my children were small. It was the 1980's when I really learned to garden, the hard way, while in the process of rescuing an attempt to create citrus orchards on barren land in Belize, Central America, using the methods of standard chemical based agriculture.

The land had been mahogany forests, logged off to provide masts for the British Navy in the eighteenth century, and as we now know, the topsoil in the tropics is very thin, so that when the forest canopy is removed by logging operations, the heavy tropical rains wash it away, leaving a wet desert. That is how we found it in 1980. We improved the drainage by cutting ditches, and then planted trees, counting on fertilizer in bags to nourish the trees. With no organic content in the sandy soil, we couldn't buy enough

fertilizer to keep the trees alive.

My husband Glenn, the engineer, shaped the rows, raised the trees and built the infrastructure of the farm –the development part of the venture. I was the one responsible for research, and headed for the libraries to try to figure out how to make things work.

It didn't take long to find the extensive literature on organic growing, or to figure out that it was the absence of organic material in our soil that was killing our trees. I learned about compost, but we had several hundred acres planted, and couldn't make nearly enough compost to feed that much soil, nor could we afford to apply it.

Composting in place, on the land between the citrus trees was the answer. We found a leguminous plant (which would capture nitrogen from the air) which did well in our weather conditions, and planted it everywhere. It grew fast in the year round warmth, and we mowed it repeatedly, leaving it lying on the ground, where it composted quickly. Sure enough, within a couple of years, we had topsoil several inches deep!

We saw this as a major breakthrough for the country because there was so much ruined and non-productive land just like ours had been, so we created an educational center on the site and started a sustainable agriculture group with local farmers.

Now we get to the gardens. There were villages around, but nobody was growing gardens for the same reason we couldn't, at first, keep our citrus trees going – no topsoil. [We were having group meetings at the farm and serving meals, and we wanted good food ourselves.](#) Again, we decided to make some good soil, but now for growing vegetables. We built some boxes like raised beds a couple of feet high, and then gathered up weeds, leaves, any available vegetation from around the site or from the nearby rainforest and piled it into the boxes. It worked as it always does when natural systems are allowed to operate, and soon the waste vegetation turned into soil.

We grew lots of vegetables, and word got around. People from the villages came to see, and soon started their own gardens. This experience was so rewarding and inspiring that gardening then became, and has remained, the focus of my life.

We sold the Belize farm and started another one in Eau Claire, Wisconsin on much smaller piece of land, but one made nearly as barren by chemical agriculture. This time we established organic practices right away, and soon were producing an abundance of

vegetables. Another aspect of the learning that led us to organic methods, taught us the importance of growing for the market close to home. This let us grow varieties that tasted best but wouldn't ship well. We started a little restaurant, featuring soup, in the town, and grew the vegetables that were the basis of the menu, going directly from the farm to the kitchen, to the customers' tables.

As the years went by, we reached retirement age, and passed on the Wisconsin farm to a young couple eager to continue organic production. We moved ourselves out to the Seattle area to be near family, and bought ourselves a house. This is one of the most expensive areas in the country for real estate, so we had to settle for [a small house on a small lot](#), but by now we are so devoted to growing our own food that we found a way to garden anyway.

Glenn built a little solar greenhouse off the south side of the carport where I start all our plants, and he built raised beds everywhere the sun shines on our lot, leaving just enough room to walk around them. The sun shines mostly in the front yard, so that's where most of the garden beds are. Actually, we hope lots of other people get the idea to grow their own food too, so we like having the gardens out front.

How wonderful it is to be at this time of life, well old, really, and still so filled with zest for living and always looking forward to next year, when we are sure to triumph over whatever setbacks we encountered this year. How great it is to know that there is no better quality food anywhere than what appears on our table. Truly, gardening is an immeasurable gift in our lives, and I celebrate the opportunity through KGI to make that known and share the gift.

Sincerely,

Jean Schanen

KGI board member and blogger