

How Much Is Enough?

by: Darrol Shillingburg

How much is enough? That's not "the sound of one hand clapping", but rather something I often ask about our food and garden needs. It always begins with "how much of this will I eat"? Sounds dumb until you try it and then, "Aha"!

How many onions will we eat this year? How much space does it take to grow that many onions? How many potatoes will we eat this year? You get the idea by now. Querying our salad consumption is even more difficult. How many salads, what content, (we may have a dozen or more garden ingredients in one salad bowl) in what amount, during what season?

After three years of this inquiry, I still have more questions than answers. However, I do have some insights into patterns of food consumption and gardening.

- There are some basic principles, but no formulas that will work for everyone.
- Your gardening approach has a huge impact on productivity.
- The varieties you select make a difference.
- If you grow it, you will eat more of it – food gardening changes your eating patterns

Now, I'll be the first to admit that none of this sounds like rocket science, but it points to the first decisions you need to make, over and over again, when creating and managing a kitchen garden.

What do I eat?
How much of it do I eat?
How much of what I eat do I want to grow?
How much space is required to grow it?

Once those basic queries are addressed garden planning can begin. As an example: I don't grow okra, never have, and never will. My neighbor loves it and grows it every year. I have a variety of lettuces in the garden 10 months out of the year. My neighbor never grows it. I live for tarragon, while it never passes the lips of others. So you get the gist – your food garden is as personal as your culinary tastes, and can be defined by them. It's also a place to explore growing and cooking new foods.

"What do I eat" in relationship to a garden may be more complicated to answer than expected, since so much of today's food is processed and packaged and bears no resemblance to anything rooted to Mom's Nature. It's a long way from garden corn to cornflakes. It's also a long way from gassed-bagged-ready-to-eat salad mix and a bed of mesclun in your backyard.

"How much of it do I eat" is also surprisingly difficult to answer. I use two approaches and a lot of forgiveness. For foods that are planted often during the year – like salad greens and potherbs, I focus on having some available all the time, rather than "how much for the year". For foods that are planted once or twice in their season and stored for part of the year, I use a total annual amount and always come up short. Like the time I grew a years supply of onions and we ate them in 3 months.

"How much of what I eat do I want to grow" will impact your gardening and your diet. (if you grow it you will eat it) So, if you want to grow your own tomatoes, peppers and cilantro for fresh salsa, your space and labor commitment will obviously be less than required for a one-year supply of tomato sauce. Since a salad garden is one of the easiest and most rewarding in this climate – putting salads on the table year-round it is a good place to start. In our garden, the beds of culinary herbs are the most visited, and may be where we save the most money (given the cost and loss of fresh herbs). So make the choice about where you want to start and be willing to change it later. Yes, it really is just that simple!

And now to perhaps the most difficult question – “**How much space is required to grow it**” Remember that “one year supply” of onions grown in a 16ft x 4ft rich organic bed, planted on a 4inch grid, with subsurface drip. We started pulling “spring onions” to grill before they began to bulb-up and harvested 50lb of onions to dry and store. They tasted so superior to store bought that we couldn’t stop eating them. That’s just one example of the “grow more – eat more” phenomenon. Grow your own salads, you’ll eat more salads, grow potatoes, you’ll eat more potatoes, grow zucchini and your neighbors eat more zucchini.

The outer limit to this question is growing all of your nutritional and caloric needs. However, limitations in space, knowledge and time make that more than a challenge for most urban gardeners. The best estimates I could find recommend using 4,000 sq. ft. of space per person with at least 2,500 sq. ft. of intensely managed organic growing beds for a self-sustaining food garden (vegan). That’s calculated on an 8-month growing season and no outside inputs, i.e. compost, manure, or other organic additives. If you import mulch, compost, manure or other organic fertilizers you will need less space to grow your food, but your garden system will not be self-sustaining.

Now if you decide to grow only 30% of your food the space requirements become much more reasonable. Thirty percent of a diet for one would require about 1,200 sq.ft. of space, and probably a little less than 2,400 sq.ft. for two people. If you use a 12-month growing season (easy to do here) the space requirements come down to about 900 sq.ft. per/person. That’s an area 60 ft. long by 15 ft. wide, or a 60’ x 30’ bed for a family of two.

So, if you’re not by now glazed with numbers, here’s my point!

- Start by growing the foods you like to eat. Ok, so coffee and bananas will not make the list!
- Be willing to change with your tastes and interests.
- Expanding your garden to grow 30% of your diet is possible.

There is an web version of this article with additional references at:

www.darrolshillingburg.com - Monthly Ramble

until next month – good growing and healthy eating

Darrol Shillingburg

Some food self-dependence is beneficial for both you and the earth

If you want to explore the possibilities and compare the requirements for growing a complete diet, the resources listed below are a good starting point. The numerical analysis of space requirements will differ depending upon the calculations used to sustain a “closed” ecological food growing system.

For additional information and documentation please refer to:

Jonathan Knight. **The Nutrition Garden Project:** <http://essenet.net/foodexp.htm>

Originally published in The Cultivar (Winter, 1997 issue), Newsletter of the [Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems](#) at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Jeavons, John. **How to Grow More Vegetables** (Fifth Edition). Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1995.