

on our radar

Bright Farms, Big City



PHOTO: RITZY RYCIAK

Seattle Urban Farmer, Colin McCrate

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CONSCIOUS CHOICE

They say that what we seek is usually in our own backyard. Nowhere does that ring more true than with organic farming — especially if you are a homeowner or apartment dweller with a small patch of grass and some rich brown soil.

As the organic food industry is increasingly co-opted by large corporations, many of us are seeking new ways to reconnect with what organic really means. Neighborhood farmers' markets are the latest hot spot for connecting with friends and great tasting food. And now, people are looking to their own backyard for food production and community gardens.

"As the question of organics is in the news, more and more people are considering where their food comes from and realizing that a tomato you grow yourself will have more nutritional value and taste better than one you buy at the supermarket," says Karen Luetjen, Executive Director of Seattle Tilth. Offering courses on organic gardening for adults and children, the nonprofit organization adds several new classes each year to keep up with the growing demand.

For a more individualized approach to urban gardening, the Seattle Urban Farm Company (seattleurbanfarmco.com) helps clients create and tend their own organic gardens. Owner/operator Colin McCrate and his team of experienced organic farmers offer services ranging from short consultations to complete design, installation, and maintenance of backyard vegetable gardens.

"Irrigation is one of the maintenance things people neglect. Vegetable plants need tons of water," says McCrate, indicating the drip-irrigation system sustaining Jennifer Sill's backyard vegetable patch. Neat rows of kale, salad greens, sugar snap peas, and broccoli contrast with the haphazard scattering of toys in the rest of the yard.

"I could have stuck some things in the ground, but it wouldn't have been a little farm," says Sill, a client of McCrate's whose young sons are fascinated with their garden. "I wanted to have a variety of things that the boys could pull out of the ground or pick off the vine. It's a great experience that I couldn't give them on my own."

With his navy flannel shirt, dirty yellow cap, and dark beard, McCrate looks the part of an organic farmer. His bright blue eyes light with enthusiasm as he describes his work. "It increases your standard of living to have good food, to watch the food grow, to take an active part in it," he says. "Once I started growing food, I became a lot more interested in what I was eating, and I started eating better."

An Ohio native, McCrate got into organic farming while he was a student at Denison University. A position as garden manager at an environmental education center on Orcas Island brought him to Washington. After working for various small farms, he founded the Seattle Urban Farm Company in January 2007.

McCrate's prices vary depending on garden size, desired crops, and site conditions, but most gardens cost roughly between \$300 and \$800 to install. A 20-by-20-foot bed is ideal for a small family, but McCrate will work with whatever suitable space is available. "We're planting forty or so different kinds of vegetables and herbs, and each one has a unique harvest period," he says. Tomatoes and carrots are among the most requested items; sugar snap peas, bush beans and salad greens make good Northwest crops.

"For urbanites who don't have the knowledge about growing things, it's nice to have someone take the guesswork out of it," says Amy Pennington, a for-hire gardener who operates under the name Go Go Green Garden. "People have become more conscious about their food choices. Backyard gardens are all the rage, and this is sort of an extra cap, hiring someone to do it for you."

McCrate hopes to continue expanding his business, which, if things go as planned, will soon include installing custom chicken coops. Caring for chickens and harvesting eggs are easy to do. "I just want more people to have chickens," he says. "I like working with them. I'm hoping there is a market." ●

—Annika S. Hipple