



A COMMON TABLE

A neighborhood garden table features a new harvest, friendship, a little mentoring — joy.

As we get older, travel farther from home, start living life on our own terms, family is what we make it. That's why Andy Cruz and his partner Ron enjoy the principles of the Thanksgiving communal table year round.

The affable couple derives great joy sharing harvest and friendship at their garden table. They dine each Sunday on the upper tier of their garden in the Rocky Butte neighborhood. Once an unmanageable slope (better suited for mountain climbing than gardening) when Ron first moved in, the two men keenly divided the hillside. As you walk into the garden you see two levels punctuated by a waist high garden "shelf" for planting between the upper and lower settings. They've succeeded in making separate and distinct garden rooms within a relatively small plot: The koi pond with night blooming water lilies is nestled next to the lower patio table area, mere steps from the cute cocktail shed. Then, on the top level — the grassy carpet dining area is cornered by the catbird seat; a rectangular enclosure where friends can sit overlooking the garden top to bottom. Sitting there, I find myself wishing more people were generous with their gardens. Evidence of this openheartedness is all around us: Smack outside the kitchen doors between their house and the neighbors' is the shared veggie garden. Along the upper fence line you'll find a shared wooden gate leading to the backyard neighbor's house with a dog run and another vegetable garden. The families mingle and share like neighbors used to, like neighbors should. So, come on in. Sit a spell and share in the golden fall light at Andy and Ron's table.

Anne Jaeger: How did the idea of shared gardens begin?

Andy Cruz: We discovered a common interest in gardening and cooking with the neighbors (a lesbian couple who've since moved to California. A straight couple now rents the house). The area between us was just grass, both households wanted vegetables. So we grew vegetables.

AJ: Now that you share your two veggie gardens among three households (and new neighbors), what have you learned about gardening with friends?

AC: Communication. The excitement about what you're going to grow. Also, don't expect much. Ron and I are pretty meticulous. We're always in the garden. I'm constantly pinching the blooms off the basil (to keep the plant from going to seed) and weeding. But we don't get mad when our neighbors don't share our obsession. That's what keeps it fun. When it comes right down to it, Ron and I get a great deal of joy out of seeing the enthusiasm grow from year to year. We don't mind the work. And we love cooking what we grow.

AJ: Sounds like you're mentoring some new gardeners along the way?

AC: Yes, that's true. And it's fun. I've learned a lot from Ron. He's the garden master. He's the hard-scape guy who thinks things through, where I might be better with plant names and placement. It's a nice combination.

AJ: Where did your love of gardening come from?

AC: Our fathers. Ron's dad built a pond in his backyard; mine built one in front. In fact, most of the rocks in our backyard come from our fathers' gardens.

AJ: When you are seated at the Sunday table and you suddenly look up to find your guests (anywhere from 4 to 12 depending on the day) talking, relaxing and enjoying themselves — tell me what thought goes through your head?

AC: Family. That's the first thing that comes to mind. And if you're coming to our backyard on Sunday, you've got an invitation to dinner. §



Andy's Favorite Flower
 'Tropic Sun' Dahlia
 5" wide flowers
 Soft orange blooms on dark stems.
 Plant grows up to 6 feet tall.
 From Swan Island Dahlias: dahlias.com

Photo by Horace long

Anne Jaeger, writes The Garden Gal for *Just Out*. Anne was a hard news reporter and anchor at KGW and KOIN before turning to gardening full time. After that her award-winning garden shows appeared on both stations. You can now look for Anne's garden videos on the *Oregonian* newspaper web site: oregonlive.com/hg, catch her on Twitter @GardenGalTV, send her a suggestion via her web site: GardenGal.TV, or write Anne@JustOut.com.