



AMBASSADORS OF SOIL

A married couple combine love for one another and gardening to help others connect to the earth.

Karen Wolfgang and Isabel LaCourse are passionate about a couple of things: the earth and each other. As owners of Independence Gardens, based in Portland, they nurture both. They make it their business to teach gardening and build new vegetable gardens with enough health, vitality and fertility to grow crunchy, delicious produce year round. You can call them the ambassadors of good soil. They take pride in spreading enthusiasm for edible gardening, one client at a time. And I'm pleased to announce to those of you who haven't met Karen and Isabel until now — they got married last year. They love what they do and one another, saying, "A healthy plant world makes us healthy." This month, Karen and Isabel prove February is a perfect time to get your veggie garden on.

eat vegetables. Not true! In fall, we grew a cone-shaped cauliflower in the school garden. Every one of the kids wanted to taste it after watching it grow. At harvest time, I had 30 kids around me pawing for cauliflower, just like it was ice cream! Moments like that make me feel grateful and honored that I can help kids (of all ages) be connected to the earth.

AG: You two have a knack for coaching, which saves gardeners a lot of wasted time, effort and money in the long run. What are the most important lessons you can offer to build a new vegetable garden, regardless of skill?

KW: There are three: First, space. How much space do you have? Even small spaces yield big returns. We build a lot of raised beds because they're easier for people, but you can grow right in the ground. Then, time. Realistically, how much time do you have? Summer gets busy and you'll need time to water and weed your garden. Finally, preferences. What vegetables do you like to eat? List them, buy the seeds or "starts" (small plants) and plot out your garden. Make a plan considering how tall the plants will grow, how much sun/water the vegetables need and how you'll take good care of the soil.

AJ: Your website describes you both as "the brainy/brawny ladies behind the business." What's that all about?

KW: People see two women arrive for a garden consultation and can't believe what we can get done. Isabel says I'm tiny (5'5" and less than 130 pounds), but urban farming is increasingly a woman's world. We work smart and hard. We know people want hassle-free help growing their own food. That's why we create planting plans, purchase the plants, work alongside clients in the vegetable garden, weed, fertilize, and do whatever they need to be successful. \$

Anne Jaeger: Karen, why do some people believe gardening is so difficult?

Karen Wolfgang: There's a sense that the earth is somehow separate from us. We feel disconnected, but we aren't. Our business reintroduces people to the plant world in a healthy way. I think we help them understand that the earth's a network of relationships, and collectively "we" are a vital part of that. Gardening isn't hard, people just haven't been taught how, and since they haven't had the chance to learn the basics, they're scared they won't "do it right." So, it's powerful when we can help new gardeners get excited about gardening.

Isabel LaCourse: (Speaking of her K-8 after-school gardening program) Parents always say kids don't like to

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Isabel LaCourse loves being a garden educator, even though she aspired to be a basketball player while growing up.

Karen Wolfgang has an anthropology degree from Princeton University, and a Master's degree in educational leadership.

INDEPENDENCEGARDENSPDX.COM

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.