

my parents wanted to do. We had a couple acres of land, relatives coming over to pick tomatoes on weekends. We grew more than we could consume." His father worked at the University of Notre Dame power plant, and his creative, inventive mother ran the garden and the family. Neither had graduated from high school. "But," he says, "they instilled in us the value of education."

When they were ready for college, he and his older brother, Jim — Tom was the second — decided they wanted to go into fisheries, and they chose Oregon State University as the best destination. OSU had a great fisheries program, and out-of-state students could work in Oregon for the summer and then qualify as residents. When Tom graduated in 1968, Jim had already served with the Marines in Vietnam, and he suggested, as Tom mildly put it, "You know, you might be better off ... doing something else with your time." That's when Tom Lichatowich joined the Peace Corps and ended up in Fiji with 11 other volunteers.

After a dozen years in Fiji, first with the Peace Corps and then with the Fijian government, Lichatowich worked for six years for the United Nations in fisheries programs in the Middle East and Africa. Most of his projects were demonstrations: showing how to make fisheries more sustainable, getting others to develop their own fish farms.

In Fiji, he found a culture that depended on mutual community support.

"In poor countries, for survival they have to pull together." Fijian society worked on a system called *keri keri*. "You are obligated to help someone if they are in need or if they ask. When someone else's house blows down, you have an obligation. When you have trouble, they'll help you."

Though complicated, it was a system in place for centuries, and it knitted the society together. Fijians couldn't really own a successful business then, because if someone came to them and needed what they were selling, they had to help. One can see how such a custom would make capitalism impossible. Today, of course, the tradition is being lost. But Lichatowich took important lessons from that culture of mutual support — lessons he still lives by today.

Even in the middle of winter, Lichatowich's garden is a world apart from the rest of his Northeast Portland neighborhood. The street is lined with one-story bungalows and neat square green lawns. When I asked for directions, he told me, "It's pretty easy to spot when you come down the street. It's a striking yellow house, and it's the only one with no lawn out front."

Photos of the summer garden show vivid masses of every shade of green; brilliant reds and oranges and purples — tomatoes, radishes, carrots, eggplants; splashes of flame-red dahlias, tall golden sunflowers; the giant dark leaves of rhubarb, shiny-deep-green basil, delicate sprays of dill and fennel, tassels of corn. Deep in the garden among all this jungle, a stone Buddha sits quiet and reflective, rather like Lichatowich himself.

On the damp gray winter day I visited,

the garden was a series of messy-looking dirt mounds laced with sticks and eggshells and bits of leaves and even old chicken bones, with wandering paths of fine orange sawdust, and a few leafless fruit trees standing brave in the winter cold. He hasn't built wood frames for his raised beds — they're just heaped-up leaf mold and rabbit manure, piled on wood chips, piled on layers of cardboard. But I'm a gardener too, and I could see the richness of those piles of dirt, the potential of the new season hidden in the humble, scrappy earth.

Ignoring the light Oregon drizzle, Lichatowich took me for a garden tour. He was quick to point out the very simplicity of his garden, despite its wealth of produce in the high season. He uses, as he said, very minimal inputs. He gets the sawdust from a man nearby with a small lumber mill, who takes down trees from tree service companies and mills them into usable pieces for woodworkers.

"Most places charge for sawdust,"

Lichatowich explains, "but he gives it away if you're willing to shovel and haul." Of course Lichatowich is. Another neighbor raises rabbits, and he drops off loads of manure — one of the secrets of the garden's success.

I was curious to know whether he planned out the garden ahead of time, mapped what he'd put where.

"Oh, I always start out with a plan," he said. "But certain things happen, it morphs and morphs, and it turns out it's a dynamic thing." The plants take over the garden. They have their own plan.

He's working on extending the planting season in the Northwest. He showed me a wooden planter about the size of three end-to-end shoeboxes, where he is raising lettuce sprouts from seeds he hand-harvested in his garden at the end of the season. The sprouts were maybe an inch tall, tiny green leaves that looked vulnerable in the cold. He'd protected them with a series of hoops made from bent recycled wire and roofed over with clear plastic. "The roof is just old plastic grocery bags. I cut them open to spread them out and poked a few holes so the sprouts get some rainwater."

His compost pile, an impressive shoulder-high three-bin fortress in the back corner of the lot, is built from used pallets. He has rigged a cleverly-designed mini-greenhouse shelf onto the side of the house with another clear plastic covering, a row of chopped-up garden hose along the edge to

weight down the cover, and a small warming bulb in the corner wired to a switch in the house. Everything is from found, scrounged, or recycled materials.

Lichatowich figures that about 60 percent to 70 percent of what he and his wife, Penelope, consume is grown in the garden. He also provides produce to his daughters and their families who live in town, and he shares with neighbors. Penelope dries and preserves fruits and nuts, makes and freezes



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**TOM LICHAOWICH,**  
NORTHEAST PORTLAND  
RESIDENT AND GARDENER

tomato and basil purees, dills their cucumbers for pickles, makes coleslaw, does some fermenting. They store onions and squash in a dry, well-ventilated garage and dig potatoes from the ground all the way through December. Having retired some years ago, Lichatowich sees the garden as a way he can save money for the family and contribute to the neighborhood.

He claims not to be a neighborhood organizer or to have an organized communal system, but he

gives away plant starts to local gardeners and sometimes posts them on Craigslist. Neighbors bring over heaps of leaves, grass clippings, any yard debris they have left over. His street is a through bike lane, and Lichatowich puts plants and produce out at the corner for free pickup.

"Always disappears quickly," he says. "I suspect we have easily given away about a third of what we produce."

He and Penelope moved into the neighborhood just a few years ago. About that time, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, and there was talk of the likelihood of a big quake here in the Pacific Northwest. Penelope tried to drum up neighborhood interest in a meeting to talk about preparing for an earthquake or other emergencies. Walking the neighborhood, she found many doorbells broken, signs saying "Do Not Disturb."

On the day of the meeting, only three people came. But later, a neighbor told her, "I won't come to a meeting, but if it's a party, I'll be there." So Penelope announced a party.

"Everybody came. Kids rode their bikes, played games in the street. And people got to know each other," Lichatowich says. Now, they have block parties, with beer provided by a neighbor who works in one of the local breweries.

Neighbors know each other; if someone's sick, people will take over food. "If an elderly lady has a branch down, neighbors help out." In the fall he grows pumpkins, decorative gourds, cornstalks for decorations, and "kids come over and do the pumpkin patch routine." They love digging into the earth for the treasure of buried potatoes.

He sees his garden as a piece of something larger, a small part of a solution that's within reach for others, too, if they'll work together. "You know, we're only as strong as the weakest link," he says. "I think the financial crisis a few years ago showed it. One entity — big banks and mortgage companies — took advantage of a part of the population and created havoc for us all. You can't do that without suffering some consequences." People — especially Americans — don't want to be dependent, he says. But we are.

Out front, we spot raccoon tracks in the fresh sawdust. He grows enough to share with urban wildlife, too: raccoons, birds, opossums, even the squirrels. It seems natural to him to share what he produces. But he wonders, is our society ready to share what we have?

"We can share tools, but if you loan out your shovel, it might come back dirty, or broken."

He examines the bare branches of a Brooks plum tree. "It seems that working toward the common good is countercultural," he says. "But I think things are changing." He cites a study he read that said the fastest-growing agricultural sector in Oregon is backyard gardens.

"That was at the time the recession hit, and maybe more people started thinking about gardening. I saw it myself in the garden stores: drip irrigation equipment, cedar raised beds, organic fertilizers." He tells of urban gardens being established in poor neighborhoods, where on 2 acres they can feed dozens of families. "It doesn't have to cost a lot. And it's all organic, so ..."

Lichatowich offers a little light of hope in a time when so many go hungry, especially in Oregon. He lives his example of backyard gardening as a simple, manageable, inexpensive way to provide what people need — not only in nutrition, but in mutual support, a sense of community and a sense of purpose.

"People go by and say, 'Gee, you're always out here, doing something in the garden. You work so hard.' But I really do not notice the time or effort. Having the time to work with nature, produce something of value, aesthetically as well as nutritionally, is a gift. I guess I am grateful for this gift."

"Plant a garden, you have a job for life." He pauses, hands in pockets, gazing over his garden.

"So you'd better love it."