

BIGGER AND BETTER

A Northwest gardening author updates his seminal work

A few weeks ago, I ran into Steve Solomon and Marina McShane at the Lane County Farmers Market. This meeting was remarkable for two reasons. One, Solomon, a guru of Northwest vegetable gardening and founder of Territorial Seed Company, has lived in Tasmania since 1998. Two, McShane had recently given me a copy of a book she and Solomon wrote together.

That book is, of course, the new, completely rewritten-from-front-to-back edition of an indispensable classic: Solomon's *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades: The Complete Guide to Organic Gardening* (Sasquatch), which appeared on the 35th anniversary of the first edition.

Solomon said of the book: "Tell *Eugene Weekly* readers that I've learned a lot in recent years and almost all of it is in this new edition. I plan to keep putting this info out there as long as I can because I want to help people grow their own food. That's why I wrote this new edition."

For this first major rewrite in 15 years, Solomon enlisted the help of McShane, a long-time friend who once worked in the seed room at Territorial and still lives near Eugene. "Steve initially asked me to update the list of seed suppliers," McShane told me. "Adaptive Seeds and Osborne are two that we added because their offerings and their PNW focus were apropos and the quality of the seed was good. I checked out several others which we decided not to include, because the quality of seed was not great." McShane did germination tests and grow-outs, and also sent seed to Solomon for him to trial.

McShane ended up making many other contributions to this comprehensive guide to year-round gardening, sharing her experience with her own 1,200-square-foot vegetable garden and, in some cases, "to challenge Steve's point of view, which may have been out of date from not being on the ground here. One good example is the availability of terrific transplants of desirable varieties which are as good or in some cases better than ones I raise at home."

McShane also wrote a totally new chapter on herbs and



MARINA MCSHANE AND STEVE SOLOMON

flowers, and updated the material on pest control products. Much of her material is seamlessly woven into the text, but the occasional sidebar accentuates a difference of opinion.

The 35th-anniversary edition is substantially bigger than its predecessors. It's about as thick as my old 1989 edition but nearly an inch and a half wider, with thinner paper and smaller type — a bit too small for me. There's more about composting, symphyllans, the chemistry of Cascadian soils, mineral deficiency in commercially raised food and how to offset the leaching that results from our seasonally wet climate.

There's also some material from Solomon's *Gardening When It Counts: Growing Vegetables in Hard Times* (New Society, 2005), including variety-specific advice on saving your own seed. One focus of *Gardening When It Counts* emphasized spacing as the key to growing vegetables with a minimum of water. That's also incorporated in the "How to Grow It" chapter of the new book — very useful information, especially if you have more space than water.

If you have more water than space, you may not buy Solomon's critique of the intensive method of organic growing, promoted by John Jeavons, that uses tons of organic matter. He's softened his comments on this topic since earlier editions and, although I agree with him in general on the subject, I think Solomon overlooks the fact that the intensive method allows people to grow lots of veggies in a limited space.

Solomon is a bit of a contrarian, but he's not afraid to change his mind — based on his own experience, that is, along with extensive research. So those who have been reading Solomon forever will note some rethinking.

One major change concerns his advice about liming Cascadian soils, and with what. And his famous recipe for COF (Complete Organic Fertilizer) has gained a few ingredients along the way and he now offers refinements for varying soil types and conditions.

In Tasmania, Solomon grows most of his own food on a quarter acre lot in a residential neighborhood. He says the climate there is much like Elkton, Oregon, where he used to live. He has long been a fan of early 20th-century literature on soil, food and health and in 1997 created an online library from which you can download books for free.

The Soil and Health Library (soilandhealth.org) is now owned by a New South Wales charity. Solomon moderates a Yahoo email chat group called "soilandhealth" and serves his community as a soil analyst. He also gives away vegetables. ■

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