

GROW

Home, Garden & Outdoors

HOW – and WHAT – does YOUR garden grow?



There's bounty – even in the high country

By Cheryl Hoefler
Blue Mountain Eagle

If your garden isn't as robust as you would like, blame your green thumb – but not the elevation.

Grant County boasts a wide range – nearly 3,000 feet – in elevation, from a low of about 1,800 feet in Kimberly to nearly 4,700 feet in Granite.

The Kimberly-Monument area, the “banana belt” of the county, is well-known for being rich in agriculture, thanks not only to low elevation, but nearby waterways – the John Day River and its North and Middle forks.

Warmer temperatures make



Far left: Lance Barker of Bear Valley harvests a heaping bowl full of greens for dinner from his garden.

Left: Jennifer Barker fills a bowl with sweet treats – green grapes from the extensive garden she and husband Lance tend in Bear Valley.

Contributed photos

for longer growing seasons which likewise make for easy gardening and varied crops. Fruit orchards, vegetable gardens – you name it, and they

can probably grow it.

Folks in most of the main John Day River Valley are able to achieve similar growing successes, aside from getting those tomatoes to ever ripen.

But, how about Seneca, Fox or even Long Creek?

If you think produce-producing options are limited in the higher elevations of Grant County – think again.

For Lance Barker of Morning Hills Forest Farms in Bear Valley, there are few, if any, limits.

Despite that area's cold climate and short season – 4,100 feet in elevation, using nearby Izee as a measurement – Barker and his wife, Jennifer, have been successfully reaping a heaping harvest year after year.

And it's not just a plentiful supply of a few items, but a variety of foods – root vegetables, greens, beans, shell peas, broc-

coli, a rainbow of cauliflower choices, tomatoes and more.

This season, the Barkers have been “buried” in a hearty crop of spinach, he said.

Not just for summer only, it's an endeavor they work at for much of the calendar year.

This season, they were able to get things started in late January, due to the relatively mild winter here. They are usually storing the last of the root vegetables in the cellar in November.

Ninety percent of what the Barkers grow is done outdoors, started in the hoophouse.

Lance said he grows everything from his own seeds, and has a “warehouse” stockpiled and categorized.

Jennifer advised people to save seeds from their best plants as a good way to develop varieties that do well in that particular area.

There are a few foods Lance hasn't been able to grow, such as melons and winter squash, and corn is pretty much out of the question. But that doesn't mean it won't ever happen.

“Just because I haven't succeeded yet, doesn't mean I can't,” he said.

The Barkers have lived in Bear Valley since 1979.

That first year, Lance said the first thing he did was create a little garden bed, while continuing to experiment, explore and expand each year.

His method: “Mostly I take what I know, and use what I don't know to make me want to know more.”

He said he left “regular gardening ideas” a long time ago.

He also expects to have to work with whatever the weather is going to dish out in order to achieve any kind of success, basically, “facilitating a biological process,” he said.

Lance, who has gardened his whole life, grew up in Kansas, where he said there are “six months of assured frost-free conditions.”

Compare that to a guarantee of about two weeks without frost up in Bear Valley.

However, Lance added, “Adjusting your gardening plans due to cold weather and frost is a piece of cake compared to having your whole garden eaten by grasshoppers.”

The vast majority of their efforts go toward feeding themselves, with plenty to last through the entire year. Jennifer does a good deal of canning, root veggies are stored in the cool cellar, and other foods go into the freezer. There's often enough extra goodies on hand to use repayment for favors or just neighborly gifts. They also grow garlic to donate to places like the local food bank.

From time to time, groups such as Master Gardeners, the Hamey County Preppers and the New Leaf Garden Club of John Day visit the Barkers' farm for lessons and to share tips. According to Jennifer, a recent visitor from Central Oregon said they couldn't grow the same foods where they live, and concluded it must be warmer in Bear Valley.

For the Barkers however, “warmth” isn't a requirement.

And “can't” isn't in the dictionary.

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