

MEN in the Garden

BY BARBI WALKER

The economic downturn has brought about an awareness of doing things differently, despite stress, job loss and sinking home values. The decline in 2008 caused people to rethink their values in socializing and purchasing power as well as leisure activities.

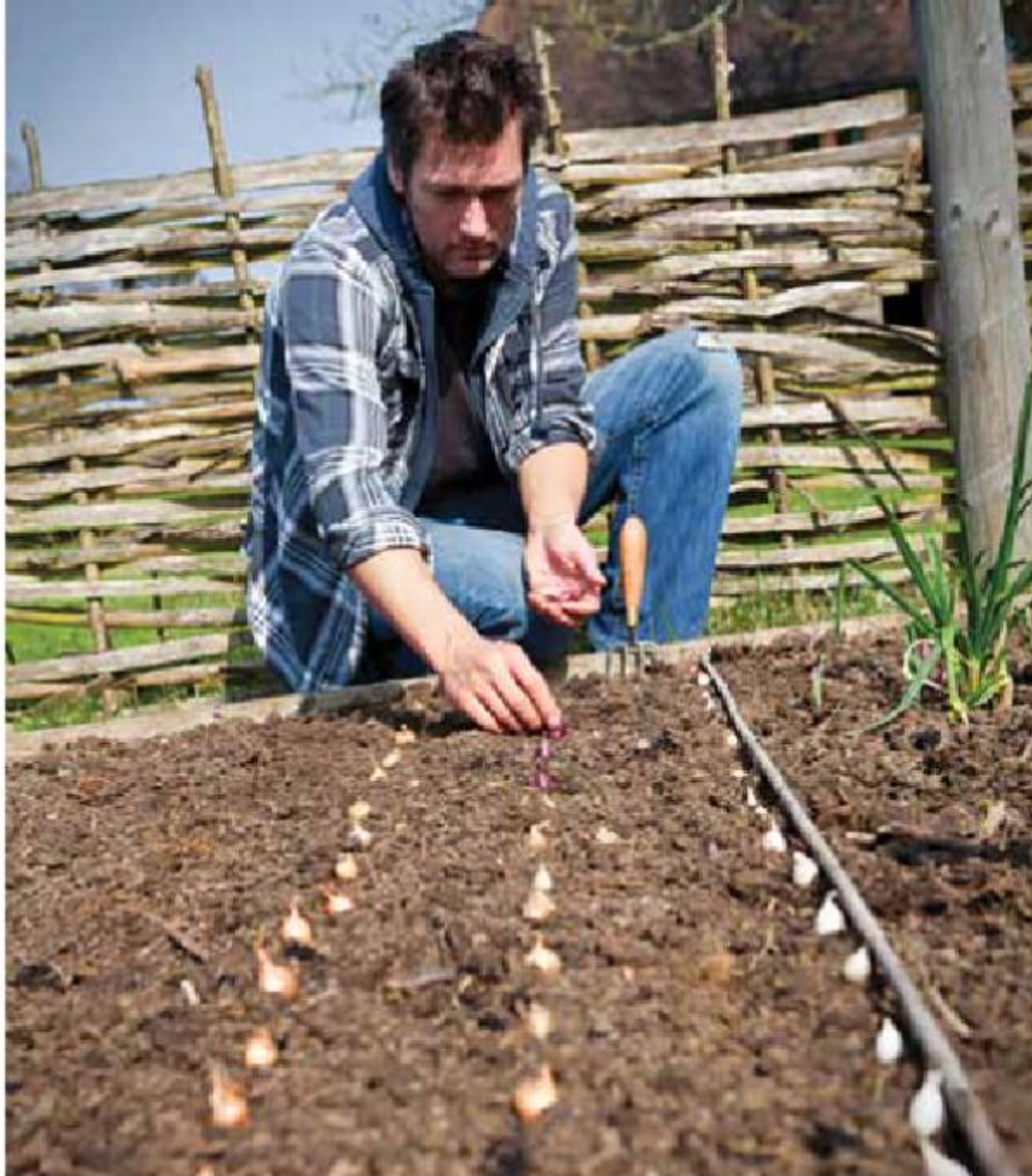
Gone are the days of bigger, faster, better and less awareness. Now we are looking at greener ways to do things – more local ways of doing things. It also means we are looking at alternative ways of doing business, relaxing and trying to enjoy life more as well as sharing our gifts with others.

One area that is seeing a resurgence of popularity is gardening. Gardening has reached a new status in this green, eco-savvy world. Long known as a relaxing endeavor, gardening isn't just about beautiful flowers – in fact, even men are now taking an interest.

Longtime Phoenix gardener Tom Devlin says gardening is more enjoyable now that he's switched his garden from a high-maintenance, high-water-using one to one that is full of drought-tolerant plants and requires much less maintenance.

"We have drought-tolerant plants and the garden is less work," Devlin said. Before, during the "showy" times of the '80s and '90s, his über lush garden rivaled many resorts and was even featured in Phoenix Home & Garden magazine. Although it was beautiful, peaceful and verdant, he didn't enjoy it as much as he does now. While friends and relatives enjoyed his garden immensely, Devlin was so busy working on it that he didn't have time to relax in it.

"Now my gardening takes less than a couple of hours a week, whereas before it was an all-weekend job," Devlin said. "We still have that tropical feel, but with drought-tolerant plants, it is much less demanding."



Gardening in Arizona is especially difficult because of the soil, sun and soaring temperatures. Bob McClendon, of McClendon's Select in Peoria, has been nurturing his organic farm since 1975, and says the number one question he gets asked is, "How do I keep plants alive?"

McClendon says that having the proper soil is key, as is planting at the correct time – which differs from the regular season throughout most of the country.

Devlin agrees. "This is an extremely hard state to garden in," he said. He advised that successful gardening starts with knowing what to plant, when to plant it and where to plant it.

If you are thinking of getting your green thumb going, "Find yourself an independent nursery with a certified nursery staff that can guide you," Devlin said. "A great place to start is with the Arizona Nursery Association. The Arizona Master Gardeners Association even has a downloadable gardening manual."

Devlin thinks the economic downturn changed the mindset and budgets of weekend and professional gardeners too.

"We are all a lot more aware of being green, recycling and looking at ways to save money," Devlin said. "Sadly, that also means some great nurseries have gone out of business."

Unfortunate and true, but for some, the change in the economy has also meant finding ways to help others less fortunate. Growing urban gardens is one way to do so.

Greg Peterson, owner and master gardener of Urban Farm, has a working farm and garden in central Phoenix and gives lessons on how to grow your own food. He believes the urban garden is important to the environment we live in and creates a sense of community.

Peterson tells people who start their own urban farms to name it, to give it purpose and aliveness. In fact, he named his space Urban Farm, instead of Urban Garden, because of what the word "farm" connotes.

"Who wants to come see a garden when you can see a farm?" Peterson said. He wanted people to know his farm was about growing produce and not just flowers. Peterson's best advice to novice gardeners: east is your best direction for planting and growing, south is second and south east is third for choosing planting spots.

Even younger generations are getting into the urban gardening and farming movement. The fruit orchard at Growing Together Giving Gardens in central Phoenix was planned, planted and tended by a young Boy Scout and his troop members. The garden and orchard are part of the Living Streams Church, which plans to donate the produce to local charities.

"We are in the early stages of the garden," said Annie Mittlestaedt, spokeswoman for the garden. But right now, the trees in the orchard are bearing fruit. "You can see the apples, pears and peaches if you come by," she said. The orchard was planted by boys and troop leaders from Boy Scout Troop 329.

One young man, Adam Schexnayder, 15, was working on his Eagle Scout Badge when his mother involved him in the church's garden. He and his troop members took on the task in February and were happy to be part of something that would give back to those less fortunate, according to an article in North Central News.

Gardening doesn't need to take up a lot of space. In fact, it can even be part of the decor.

The Parlor Pizzeria, a modern pizzeria in Phoenix, serves hand-crafted pizzas topped with homegrown produce. Owner, designer and gardener, Aric Mei, said that gardening has always been in his DNA.

The fragrant garden welcomes you on the front walk to the entrance. Large, purple eggplants and bright red peppers add to the garden's beautiful colors. Mei said the idea behind the garden was getting produce as fresh as possible. Fresh herbs topping pizzas and in cocktails make for one delicious meal and has customers coming back for more.

Mei's philosophy is creating a sense of involvement and caring for the environment. He thinks we as a society have gotten too far away from where our food comes from. "The most important action our garden does is give people a sense of who we are and what we are trying to do," Mei said.

Giving, sharing and growing are things gardeners cultivate, and the mindset of these men shows, as an old Greek Proverb says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." That it is generosity of spirit and appreciation of nature that continues a society's success. ■

SOURCES
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