

Sturdy

Young Duluth couple creates a prolific urban garden in their first year.

Start

Story and photos by Margaret Haapoja

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA-DULUTH STUDENTS living near them like to call Alyssa Mesedahl and Jarrid Greenwood “farmers.” With neat raised beds and tall sunflowers framing the property not far from the UMD campus, their small lot is covered with vegetables and flowers. It’s hard to believe they have only been gardening one season—

but with help from their friends, some self-education and a lot of enthusiasm, they produced bumper crops in 2016 and are gearing up for this year.

“Both of our parents were gardeners, so it’s in the family,” says Alyssa, a full-time graduate student in exercise physiology at the College of St. Scholastica. “But we’ve never done anything on

this scale, so when we moved into the house, we decided we’d really like to grow our own food together.”

Alyssa and Jarrid, a Lifelink helicopter pilot, were inspired by a documentary about permaculture called *Inhabit*. “It talked about urban farmers that have a small yard like us or a rooftop or a community garden,” Alyssa recalls. “I thought



Alyssa and Jarrid harvest carrots from their front-yard garden.



Fences (and two dogs) keep deer and other pests out of the garden.



it was gorgeous. Rather than have a lawn to mow and weed-whack and keep up, I thought we have to do that.”

In addition to their parents, family friend Tom Levar helped them get started. Tom, who has extensive gardens, recommended seed varieties and other resources, and helped Alyssa and Jarrid supplement their soil.

Building the Soil

The couple moved into their home in December 2015. Because the spring was mild, they were able to start work early. “We ripped up the front yard,” Jarrid recalls. “We had a really big cedar tree, a lilac bush, all sorts of grubby stuff in front of the window, and we hacked all those down using a sod cutter.” They also built a network of raised beds, trellises and a substantial fence around the yard. Some of the sod and dirt from the front and side yards was used to raise the ground level in the back, which had a gentle slope toward the house, up 2 to 3 feet. More soil was hauled in from several sources, including Tom’s yard and Garden Green® from the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District. The compost is clean and cheap and because their soil contains so much of it, the couple did not have to fertilize during the season. They did spread fertilizer over the gar-

dens last fall, though.

Like many Duluth gardeners, the native soil on the site was a mixture of rocks and clay. “A good soil mixture is very important,” Jarrid says, adding that he tilled down about 12 to 18 inches to begin. “The raised beds in the front yard are double dug and contain one-third black dirt, one-third compost and one-third peat moss. Some are 2 feet wide by 18 inches deep, some are 2 feet by 24 inches, and some 2 feet by 36 inches.”

Deciding What to Grow

Jarrid’s advice to beginners is “Start small and expand as you need to.” He and Alyssa weren’t sure how much food they would need and found they grew too much of many vegetables during their first season. “We didn’t need 20 plants and 3 rows of potatoes,” he says. “We shared with family and coworkers. I brought loads of vegetables to work and handed them out there. It didn’t go to waste.”

They grow the foods they like to eat: beets for their roots and the greens, which Jarrid enjoys in salads, sometimes three times a day. Alyssa likes squash and thinks it’s one of the easiest plants to grow. She also favors heirloom varieties of all types. “I like the idea of heirlooms,” Alyssa says, “growing varieties that

there aren’t a lot of them left. I think the heirlooms taste better than hybrids. I love the different colored varieties, too. I’m growing an heirloom beet, ‘Chioggia’, that has stripes, and this year we have a variety of bean called ‘Dragon Tongue’ that has stripes, too.”



Harvests were plentiful in their first year in the garden.

Sturdy Start

The backyard, which included rows of tomatoes on the edge and sprawling squash plants, was less intentional in design than the front, with its raised beds and straight paths. Volunteer sunflowers edge both the back and front and are very decorative. Perennials add to the beauty and supply food for bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

“Last spring, we figured out what does well where,” says Alyssa, and they read about companion planting and experimented with combinations. They followed the advice not to put peas and onions near each other, but found that basil and tomatoes; pole beans and sunflowers; and squash, corn and beans are all happy companions. “From our first-

year garden experience, we’ve learned to give plants plenty of space to expand and to thin carrots, beets and radishes early,” she says. A straw-bale garden produced abundant tomatoes and will be used for tomatoes, cucumbers and squash again this year.

In their first season, they grew all of their plants from seed, but on-going remodeling projects since then have cut into their time and space for seed starting. In 2017, they will buy more vegetable starts to supplement plants that are directly sown outdoors. Alyssa and Jarrid try to get their seeds and plants into the ground as soon as possible because of the short growing season in Duluth.



Beets and lettuce grew well in the garden.



Lessons Learned

Among the things the couple learned their first year was that they watered too heavily. “There were a lot of things like some squash that had some rot,” Jarrid says. “Things were turning yellow, so we cut back on our watering and it seems like it’s helped. We collect our water from our sump pump so it’s really handy.”

Unlike many Duluth gardens, deer seem to stay away from Jarrid and Alyssa’s place. “They have hardly been in our yard,” says Jarrid, who credits their two dogs in their kennel for keeping the deer out.

They’ve also learned the great connections that can be forged among



Sunflowers edged the yard to add a decorative touch. Squash is a favorite plant of Alyssa’s.



“We are passionate about local food and its positive impact on the environment and health, and we see the value in propagating heirloom seed varieties,” she says. “It’s also encouraging to see how many people stop by and ask questions and are interested in growing their own gardens. We hope to be an inspiration to other urban gardeners who may have limited space and less-than-ideal soil and show them that it can be done!” **ng**

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gardeners. “We do trades with our fellow gardeners,” says Jarrid. “We’ll have a lot of squash or a lot of tomatoes, and we’ll trade for something we don’t have so much of.”

The college students nearby have asked what will be planted in 2017, and Jarrid and Alyssa have some big ideas. Sugar beets, maybe? Alyssa would like to try garlic, and Jarrid would like to try asparagus. Jarrid likes the beauty of gardening and might plant more flowers. “Walking back here in the garden is just very relaxing and calming,” he says.

Fruit, too, is on the agenda. “We’d like to plant more berries,” says Alyssa. “We added a bunch of blueberry plants, and next year we’d like to add more berries—something perennial that would come back every year and not take a whole lot of work.”

Why They Garden

While still beginners, Jarrid and Alyssa have discovered how meaningful and joyful gardening is.

“I enjoy being outside, getting my hands dirty, planning and anticipating the year’s varieties and the reward of watching tiny seeds actually grow into food,” says Alyssa. “The garden is something Jarrid and I built together and are very proud of and something we do together outside every day of the growing season. It has brought us closer as a couple.”



Favorite Varieties

Greens: Rocky Top lettuce mix, Scarlet and Blue Curled Scotch kale, Perpetual spinach

Root vegetables: Atomic Red and Cosmic Purple carrots, Detroit Dark and Chioggia beets

Tomatoes: Glacier, Monomakh’s Hat and Riesentraube tomatoes

Squash: Greek Sweet Red and North Georgia Candy Roaster squash

Others: Dragon Tongue bush bean, Blue Spice basil, Suyo Long cucumbers

—M.H.



Jarrid and Alyssa look forward to the 2017 season.

