

Home-grown groceries for Marlboro couple

Marlboro couple need only step out their front door to fill their plates

By JOSEPH SAPIA

FREEHOLD BUREAU

At day's end, Ellen Simonetti and husband, Bob Mellert, savor their home-grown vegetables, fruits and flowers.

"We take a glass of wine and walk the whole property," Simonetti said. "Gardeners should do that, everyday."

"Just try to get a sense of what's going on," Mellert said.

"That's our time to enjoy our garden," Simonetti added. "You have to smell the roses."

A garden — gardens, actually, making use of front yard, side yards and backyard of the property — is not all play.

"I never get a break, here," said Simonetti, 62. "If you come out here in the middle of January, there's kale growing, and leeks.

"It's our hobby," she added. "Some people play golf, we grow food."

So far, the gardens have yielded about 650 pounds of fruits and vegetables.

"I guess about one-third goes (immediately) into our stomachs," said Mellert, 72, noting they have a "Jersey Fresh" home-grown crop available by simply walking outside their Crine Road house.

Another one-third is stored — canned, dried, pickled, frozen or made into jelly — for future use. The final one-third donated to the Freehold Area Open Door food pantry for needy people.

Here and there are blueberry, winter squash, okra, corn, eggplant, beat, celeriac, kohlrabi and cucumber. About 35 fruit trees bear peaches, apples, pears and cherries.

Passing a Chinese chestnut tree, Simonetti said, "This chestnut tree will give me hundreds and hundreds of chestnuts, this year."

The deck off the kitchen holds containers of basil, cilantro, parsley, mint and aloe. A bird bath with running water sits at one corner of the sloping yard.

Diane C. Zahorsky, the home horticulturist in the Freehold Township office of the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension, noted how productive Simonetti and Mellert make their garden — using limited space, successfully growing crops and, then, using the harvest.

One patch, for example, is a hodgepodge of strawberries, tomatoes, green beans and celery.

"What struck me is how intensely that garden is planted," Zahorsky said. "Strawberries planted among the vegetables. They just stick them in, wherever there is room — multiple crops.

"The other thing is just how they prepare everything they grow," Zahorsky said. "They can until they don't have anymore jars to can in — and that's a lot of work. If you want to eat everything out of your garden, it's a lot of work. You're cooking all the time."

Mellert is a professor of philosophy at Brookdale Community College in Middletown. Simonetti is a part-time teacher of mathematics and psychology at Brookdale.



Robert Mellert (left) and wife Ellen Simonetti of Marlboro have turned their property into a gardening wonder. In front of them are displayed some of their home-grown goods, including tomatoes, garlic and peppers. (STAFF PHOTO: MARY FRANK)

Their work schedule, with summers free, lends itself to gardening. In the winter, they have their jobs, along with in-house chores, reading and volunteering with the Monmouth County Master Gardener program, of which both are graduates.

Mellert is long-time gardener, while Simonetti got hooked in recent years.

"My grandmother and my mother, we always had a garden," Mellert said.

Simonetti, too, had a gardening family. Her grandfather had peaches, an arbor of grapes, tomatoes and figs — with a fig tree on the couple's property being a remnant of one of Simonetti's granddad's.

The couple have lived on the property, once part of the Crine family farm, since 1987. About 10 years ago, when the property was slightly altered by a housing development next-door, Mellert planted white pines as a buffer.

While the property has a cozy, private feel, it also opens up to its neighbors. In the melting pot of Marlboro, the garden is a sharing experience between Simonetti, originally from the Bronx, and Mellert, who grew up in Cleveland, and neighbors from China, Japan and the Ukraine.

"None of these people speak English," Simonetti said. "We've got all these hand-signals."

Reaching out to the neighborhood is not new. Before the property was re-aligned with the development and fruit trees were accessible from the road, the garbage collector would reach out his truck window and grab a peach.

"The mailman would come and grab a couple," Simonetti said. "And they'd wave to us. It was wonderful."

At the back of the property, dahlias grew in different colors — white, pink and a maroon-white combination. The roots of the 75 dahlias will have to be dug up for winter. Otherwise, they likely will die with the frost.

Little, if anything, goes to waste.

"They use everything (they grow)," said Zahorsky, tapping her desk for emphasis.

If people do not eat the crop, it goes to the critters of suburbia — squirrels, ground hogs, possums and skunks.

"Recognize that stuff?" asked Mellert, noting the droppings of deer, which help themselves to the granny smith apples.

Other organic material is composted, only to return to the soil.

"When I walk through (the) gate there," said Mellert, noting a fenced-in garden at the property's rear, "I'm relaxed. That's not to say I won't confront a million (gardening) problems."

Recently, they thinned out a patch of wild blackberry, leaving them to figure out what to do with that area of the yard. In a garden, of course, a chore always has to be done.

"We have to come out here today, Honey," Mellert told his wife, noting the abundance of the crop, "and do tomatoes, again."