The Power of Growing Our Own Food
The power of growing our own food is many-faceted.

Firstly, our own physical and emotional strength and stamina is helped by living food and fresh nutritional tastes.

Secondly our emotional well-being is helped by the act of gardening itself.

Thirdly, our sourcing food nearby creates a change for the larger economy as well as our personal budget.

By eating fresh, healthy plants we encourage healthy bodies. It means that when eating healthy we feel better, perform better, and have better capacity for life on all levels. Many have discovered that food is medicine for the prevention of disease. Olympic trainers know it is the foundation for athletic strength. These facts are well documented on our website and the stories on our blog.

Like most, my understanding has come out of the daily experience of how I feel as I make food choices. Many people don’t realize that we can be empowered by our food choices. Those who are just beginning to question whether growing their own food is a solution for their desires to eat well can be encouraged by those of us who have taken this path and learned to be gardeners.

I am told by experts that the journey from a Hobby Gardener to Gardening Enthusiast takes about five years. Regardless, this “journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,” as the ancient saying goes. I want to invite you to take that first step in beginning your own journey toward the empowerment of growing your own food.
My Own Story
The journey of empowerment in eating healthy food and the security and quality of life it gives me started in my teens. Then, I suffered from severe depression and mood swings, as well as compulsive eating. I had no idea that I was hypoglycemic and making things worse by bingefood on carbohydrates and sugary food. For me, learning to eat well was like a resurrection, a new life, a new foundation for living. I slowly grew stronger in small steps, many headaches, and the cycles of up and down emotionally to become capable of including healthy nutrition as a base. For me, the consequences of eating sugar are instant. The choice to eat healthy or not is a constant decision. Feeling BAD has motivated me to read labels or totally avoid certain foods. I notice many young parents around me having to help their small children gain equilibrium through nutrition too. It all takes time.

A Lifestyle Choice
When we started our greenhouse company, Growing Spaces, in the late 80’s we didn’t know that we would be coming into a time when food safety was an issue. We were just after the taste, nutrition and protection for our garden from the deer and cold of the Rocky Mountain winters. Today our physical reactions to consuming the “industrial food pipeline” are not healthy for us. Perhaps this is due to GMOs. Who Knows? (To understand GMOs see below)

Food Allergies are on the rise and a part of our own experience. Even processed wheat and dairy have instant consequences now for my family and some friends. This is the new motivation for seeking self-sufficiency.

Due to that physical experience many of us shop at health food stores at a higher expense than normal grocery stores and eventually consider learning to grow our own food as an alternative. This can start with a few pots or indoor plants, or a cold-frame or sharing a garden in the community. Gardening in America is becoming an economic choice and a choice for health and pleasure. (see Barbara Kingsolver Animal, Vegetable, Miracle)
Pleasure is obviously a prime mover, as the local tastes of fresh organic food, the smells of deep rich soil and the color of lovely flowers tended by my own hands are so rewarding. The freedom to have this experience was our prime value in presenting the Growing Dome. We wanted to share our success in creating a healthy lifestyle based on growing organic food year-round in the Rocky Mountains, for all the pleasures it gives us.

One gardening pleasure is the “re-set” of time away from the bustle of busy lives inside the separate space of a Growing Dome. The pause of gardening becomes a quieting, a respite, and a return home to oneself that centers and settles us and allows us to re-calibrate. We hear from school teachers that this is the case for children and teens as well.

Keeping plants somehow helps me tend my own life force and remember that I too need rest. It reminds me of what it means to be a human being beyond all my functions and roles. Gardening brings me back to wholeness and completion and the blessings of life. For me, gardening for my own food grounds me in the goodness of nature and growing things. Gardening reminds me that power is not only measured in accomplishments, or checking off the items on my to do list, but in the peace of being here receiving life. It shows me the cycles of life and death and the challenges of insects, predators, temperatures and soil conditions. It reminds me of the beauty of nature and her seasons and often gives me surprises and the humility of learning that I am not always “in control.” It offers me the dance of learning more and more about how to abide and thrive through good practices and careful tending.

It grows. I grow. It dies. I let go. There are steady streams of discovery.
Pain can motivate the move toward fresh food as preventative medicine. When my father died of Cancer I was 35 years old. At the challenging times when our hearts break over the news of serious illness in ourselves or a loved one, our focus becomes very clear. Our determination to learn or offer what we can to preserve life becomes primary.

“An individual doesn’t get cancer, a family does” according to Terry Tempest Williams. How to describe the turning point of watching my cheery, vibrant, athletic father shrivel under the disease and its treatment? His cancer didn’t give us the time or the knowledge to turn things around in those days, and it motivates much of my life even now.

“Buddha says there are two kinds of suffering: the kind that leads to more suffering and the kind that brings an end suffering.”

Joseph Campbell taught that life seems to offer continual choice points for our evolution through the natural cycles that come with challenges that help us to become mature and integrated, that allow us to re-invent ourselves. His description of the archetypal Hero’s Journey shows that we are all heroic, as we unfold inside the challenges and choices of our natural path. For many of us, the changes since 9/11/2001 and later, the Great Recession of 2008, meant the shock of such a shift in “reality” that we are still adjusting to. A change of lifestyle came for most of us requiring the deep examination of priorities.
I love her word “mojo” and I feel it to mean “power.” For me the power of growing your food can contribute to the palpable empowerment, rather than our feeling disempowered by the conditions of our lives. It is not just about “survival” or “self-reliance.” As a commitment to good nutrition and all the added benefits of learning to garden, it supports experiencing our best selves, our most vital selves. Reclaiming the health and strength that is our birthright, as well as the joy and nurturance in living is a very empowering process. I call it a revolutionary choice, because it comes out of awareness, and requires a turning — turning away from the norm which can have immense benefits. How can we measure the cost or benefit of Aliveness?

“Revolution” (from the Latin revolutio, “a turnaround”) is a fundamental change in power or organizational structures.... or “a change in the social order” according to Wikipedia.
Shifting Our Priorities...
We all complain that there is “not enough time” for gardening or cooking. What if we questioned that assumption and shifted our priorities? Why is self-care so easy when we realize we are sick? What motivates the ability to make a lifestyle change?

The American family averages about 30 minutes a day for cooking and cleanup. In freeing ourselves and our schedules from the “chore” of food preparation, we’ve enslaved ourselves as a society by becoming dependent on a small group of big companies to feed us — companies that value their well-being more than ours. It is as if we outsourced our food production and management to large corporations for the sake of convenience.

I understand. I am the daughter of two Midwest farmers who “left” their background to be part of the modern world in moving to California for a “fresh beginning after the war.” I grew up in the abundance of California in the forties. The warm climate and backyard abundance of fruit trees was paradise for my folks who had endured the Minnesota cold for most of their young lives. I grew up in the time when Orange County was full of oranges....and Burbank was full of magic and imagination in movie studios just down the block. But we didn’t have a garden and much of our food was still fresh from local farms.

My early life in my parents’ post-war experiences of the middle class advancements through new industries and the discoveries of modern science left BEHIND the art and grace of keeping a backyard garden. My Midwest parents had the habit of cooking good meals together as a family, but I remember the first frozen meals my Mom started using, the convenience of canned food as it developed, and the marvel of frozen vegetables to “make life easy.” Food planning started to be measured by convenience over quality. This was the new excitement!

I know that my parents were innocent of the damage that would come through the industrialization of food systems. I understand that many in the world still don’t understand the dangers of processed food, or find motivation to be careful about food choices. But, motivation comes with life’s lessons. Why wait until illness overtakes us to try the healing lifestyle of fresh organic food?
That convenience became the modern motivator for fast food. NOW, we live in a fast food culture where junk food is more expensive per calorie than fresh food and vegetables. For Jamie Oliver, the problem stems from the loss of cooking skills at home and the availability of processed foods at every turn, from the school cafeteria to church function halls, factories and offices. This Food Revolution is about saving lives by inspiring everyone: moms, dads, kids, teens and cafeteria workers to get back to basics and start cooking good food from scratch.

In responding to the question of why we need a Food Revolution, Jamie Oliver remarks: “We’re losing the war against obesity in the U.S. It’s sad, but true. Our kids are growing up overweight and malnourished from a diet of processed foods, and today’s children will be the first generation ever to live shorter lives than their parents. It’s time for change. It’s time for a Food Revolution.”

The change in power we are speaking of is the power to choose what we eat, to know what is in it and therefore to have control over the quality of food we eat. It also relates to the power of the food itself for nourishment and healing. Food is more than just a form of energy. Food is the fuel our bodies run on, and it’s a form of power. When you learn how to grow your own food and you encourage others to do the same, you are taking power back into your hands — power over your diet, your health and your life energy.
Two stories give me courage when I think of the power of growing our own food: One is of Paul Renner and the other is the story of Cuba’s agricultural Revolution.

Late in June of 2011 Paul Renner came by Growing Spaces. He was “completing his odyssey” he said, traveling from Gabrielle Cousins Living Foods program in Arizona back to his home in Big Fork, Montana.

Paul Renner’s luminous presence and wide vocabulary for explaining his transformation from “death’s door” to his current vibrant health, was awe inspiring for me. As he sat before me early one morning, sharing about his journey to “food self-sufficiency” and his return to health, I couldn’t imagine him at 400 pounds, in a wheelchair, a diabetic and alcoholic on 13 medications. His current state of shining vibrancy, was more than health, it was aliveness and gratitude for life.

Paul’s inspiration for supporting a “culture of life” and the “grace that always surrounds us” has become a mission to teach what he has learned. His story has been told succinctly in articles and on his website, but my personal tap on the shoulder came when he said proudly, “I haven’t had a toxic beverage in four and half years.”

Citing his learning from Jeannette Chavez in Calista, Montana, who taught him the initial principles of the Hypocrites Institute, as well as Gabriel Cousins, who works with Type II diabetes, and many other diseases, he exemplified and demonstrated the living foods lifestyle. “We are all a part of life from photosynthesis to blossoming,” he told me. “We can only find healthy foods regionally (100 miles in circumference to where we live…) at best,” said Paul. He devotes his energy to teaching and providing a local food garden for his community in and around a 51 ft. Growing Dome on his property.

Paul Renner’s Traveling Living Foods Kitchen

As our conversation closed he took me to his car and showed me his traveling “living foods kitchen” in the back. There he showed me sprouts in all stages of growth, fresh organic food in a cooler, a stainless steel juicer, a supply of purified water and all the necessities to keep his diet strong. His demonstration of the “simple life” and a “holistic approach to the human condition” was like a call to live life more abundantly.

• Visit Peaceful Gardens, the community garden Paul Renner founded
• Read Paul Renner’s full story as reported by The Daily Inter Lake newspaper
• Paul was kind enough to share some of his experience on video for us. It’s even better to see and hear his story in person! Enjoy!
Cuba's organic food revolution

On a collective scale the amazing story of Cuba's organic food revolution is well told in a documentary called: “The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil.” I will make a long story short, just to make the point that despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and America's embargo placed on Cuba in 1992, it developed an economy based on the cultivation and development of urban agriculture which had no pesticides or oil-based fuel, which accidentally led to better health for the whole population.

“In 1989, the Soviet system began to unravel. Imports dropped overall by 75% and oil imports by 53%. Known officially by the Castro regime as the ‘Special Period in Time of Peace’, this moment in Cuba’s history saw it slide close to the edge of collapse, as all aspects of life were affected by the crumbling of its international market.

The most significant impact was on food. Some 57% of Cuba's calorific intake was imported, and it was estimated that the population relied on other countries for over 80% of all their protein and fats. The Soviet collapse also led directly to an 80% reduction in fertilizer and pesticide imports. Prior to 1989, most of Cuba’s intensive agriculture was dependent on these imports - their disappearance was thus a disaster for its agricultural system.

For a less resourceful and determined nation than Cuba, such action by the world’s only superpower (America) could have spelled disaster. But rather than roll over and die, Cuba began to foment a new food revolution. The nation responded to the crisis with a restructuring of agriculture. It began a transformation from conventional, high-input, mono-crop intensive agriculture, to smaller organic and semi-organic farms.”

“Growing your own food is like printing your own money. Food is the problem and food is the solution,” says Rod Finley, co-founder of the LA Green Grounds. “Gardening is my graffiti, I grow my art. I use the garden and the soil as my cloth. You would be surprised how the soil can do if you let it be your canvas. I have witnessed my garden become a tool for the transformation of my neighborhood.”
As Ron Finley says in his TED Talk “We are the soil.” Gardening is both therapeutic and defiant, because it is taking our food safety and nutrition into our own hands. “Plus, you get strawberries.” If “We are what we eat” why not embrace a lifestyle that includes a bit of wildness?

“Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from.”
– Terry Tempest Williams

One really good source is the Grow Your Own Food Summit another is Food Matters and a very inspiring website from the University of Minnesota

Knowing that our food is healthy because we grew it ourselves is a joy for food sensitive people like me. I feel more secure in this lifestyle, and it grounds me. I encourage you to take just that one first step.

What will it be? Is it a potted plant, or a window box? A little cold frame or a tower garden? A sun room or a backyard garden?

What can you do to begin your gardening journey?

We are here to help.
Puja Dhyan Parsons, CEO and Co-founder