

Seeds of Change

By CAROL MARINO ■ The Daily Inter Lake

This time of year, Montana gardeners have visions of sun-warmed juicy tomatoes, delicate chartreuse lettuces and lacy carrot tops dancing in their heads. Palms start itching to dig in the dirt as our growing season approaches, albeit, in stops and starts.

In spite of the current economic crisis, one thing we know we can invest in with a reasonable rate of return is a garden. According to the Burpee Seed Company, with every dollar you invest in a home-grown garden you get an average of \$25 worth of store-bought produce.

It's no wonder that grassroots sustainability groups are sprouting up everywhere across the country. In the past year, several have launched in the Flathead Valley.

Essential Stuff Project (ESP) meets the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7 p.m. at Clementine's in Bigfork. Last year, co-founder Catherine Haug was looking for other sympathetic souls sensing a loss of community and departure from self-sufficiency. A Bigfork native, since retiring in 2006 she's made Bigfork her year-round home, but says she "became disillusioned with how people have gotten so far away from what it means to really live."

ESP explores sustainability issues and methods, from making cheese and brewing beer, to making candles and soap. This year the group is considering creating larger local gardens and farms with a mission of minimizing the local ecological footprint.

One member, Fran Wade, lived off the grid — that is free from all municipal utilities — for 18 years. Her dream came true in 1982 when she and her husband built a homestead on six acres in the North Fork. They raised goats, chickens and horses and hunted for deer, elk and bear. With the aid of a large greenhouse, they grew 60 percent of their vegetables, and gathered huckleberries, serviceberries and wild strawberries. They heated with wood, hauled water from the creek which they used for refrigeration, and filled their kerosene lanterns with more efficient, cleaner burning jet fuel.

"I'm basically a Luddite," Wade says. Luddites were originally 19th century anti-Industrialists whose primary objection was to mechanized looms. Today it refers to anyone who largely rejects technology.

"I believe in being a steward and living in tune with the land," she adds. A self-proclaimed hermit, Wade's always been more comfort-

able with the slower pace of self-sufficient living — "living in the moment," as she puts it — and free from consumer greed.

"It's amazing the stuff you really don't need!" she says.

For cash, she and her husband supplemented their income as buckskinners. An artist, Wade sewed with the sinew they'd preserved from their game, and decorated with beading and bark the skins her husband sold at regional rendezvous events.

Now living in Bigfork, Wade still spends time in the woods when she can, staying in Forest Service cabins and continuing her art.

About living self-sufficiently she says, "It's not a picnic. You're ultimately solely responsible for the choices you make. But nothing is insurmountable."

The rewards?
"Serenity. Oneness with your surroundings. Independence."

While most of us aren't ready or willing to jump completely off the power grid, the benefits of harvesting a garden's bounty planted by our own hand and the sweat of our brow can inspire us to put our shovel where our sod is.

Having her first baby last year, combined with a desire to promote a community's fundamental purpose of providing for and keeping each other healthy and safe, inspired Siara Loveless to start the **Flathead Crop Circle**, a group dedicated to promoting sustainability through gardening.

The Circle is loosely based on the Seed Savers Exchange, a nonprofit national program founded in 1975 whose mission is to preserve and pass on heirloom seeds as a living legacy. The largest non-governmental seed bank in the United States, the Exchange maintains more than 25,000 endangered vegetable varieties.

Loveless hopes to draw local people to the group who are experienced with particular types of seeds and who know how to ensure genetic purity.

"Our community is our extended family," Loveless says. "I want to leave this place happier and better than how I found it."

The Flathead Crop Circle meets every third Saturday of the month, from 5:30 to 7 p.m., at JD Morrell's in Hutton Ranch Plaza. Call Loveless at 257-3299 for more information.

Lyn Hendrix is putting her philosophy behind gardening and self-sustainability into practice with "**Finding Joy in Change**," a new group meeting twice a month, at 7 p.m. Wednesdays at the Golden Agers Community Center in Whitefish.

For the last eight years Hendrix and her husband have lived on their 15-acre Walking Bear Ranch in Whitefish, complete with root cellar, greenhouses, chickens, goats, cows, sheep and llamas.

"The biggest lesson I've learned," Hendrix says,

"is that it's very difficult ('read impossible') to do what we've set out to do without mentoring and assistance." That's the driving force behind establishing a group for people to share their knowledge and skills.

"Everyone has the fundamental right to having their basic needs of shelter, food, water and health care met," Hendrix says. "The financial well-being of our nation is uncertain. We must get back to basics and become more self-reliant, as individuals and as a community."

Concerns about GMO (genetically modified) crops, toxic herbicides and pesticides, and uncertainty about the world's finances and climate also factor into the group's shared philosophy.

"It's my belief that we inhabit the most beautiful planet in the universe and are the only creatures allowed to determine how and in what manner we spend our time here," Hendrix says. "It's in that state of mind that we can find the 'joy' in connecting with the earth. Now, circumstances are occurring that remind us of how far we've allowed ourselves to stray from what is truly meaningful and lasting. Perhaps we can regain our role as stewards of this amazing place."

While prospective gardeners are sizing up corners in their yards where they might cultivate a little garden patch to call their own, savvy gardeners began sprouting seeds indoors in March to get a jump on Montana's short growing season.

For 20 years Deborah Schatz has started seeds indoors, effectively extending her growing season by six to eight weeks. Originally to save money, she quickly discovered the pleasure of watching them grow and knowing that her garden produce is, from seed to table, completely free of chemicals.

Living between Columbia Falls and Whitefish, she figures her last frost date as June 1. She starts the seeds that need the longest growing season such as tomatoes, green peppers and pumpkins, between March 15 and April 1. Cucumbers, melons and corn germinate well indoors, Schatz says, but don't like to stay indoors too long and don't germinate well in damp weather, so she doesn't start them until mid-April.

She uses plastic, individual-cell trays with clear lids and a starting medium such as Miracle-Gro instead of soil, which provides all the plants' nutrients; then transplants the seedlings as they get bigger into larger seed trays. Fluorescent plant lights with grow bulbs are left on above each tray for about 18 hours a day; the plants "rest" the other six hours.

"You don't need to buy a lot of expensive equipment or supplies," Schatz says. "The key is to use a good starting medium, provide lots of light, and don't keep the seed starts in too warm of an environment because they'll get too leggy (long and spindly)." "What you want are smaller, compact plants

We are stardust
Billion year old carbon
We are golden
Caught in the devil's bargain
And we got to get ourselves
back to the garden

— Lyrics from "Woodstock"
by Joni Mitchell, 1969



with thick stems."

Schatz also recommends letting the seedlings gently acclimate to the outdoors by moving them out in the sun for short periods of time before transplanting, which makes them hardier.

Wealthy are those of us who have a place to call our own where we can choose to live gently, tend a garden, and watch the sun rise and set upon it. As we adjust to leaner times, we should consider asking ourselves what things are truly necessary in our lives and what can we comfortably live without. Living a simple life can and should be more about freedom than sacrifice.

If you do plant a garden this year, while you're at it, throw in a row for your friends and neighbors and the local food bank.

Happy Earth Day, April 22.

For general information about gardening in Montana, log onto Montana State University Extension's Web site and take a look at its Garden Guide; <http://gardenguide.montana.edu/>

Check out next month's *Inter Act* magazine for helpful information on container gardening. Look for it in the May 12th edition of the *Daily Inter Lake*.

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