



Photo by Kelly Johnson

LIVING OFF THE LAND

Your own backyard can be the key to lasting health.

By Karlyn McKell | Contributor

People often forget that the best way to eat healthy is to eat fresh, and that finding fresh food can be as quick and easy as walking into your own backyard.

Jacksonville-based Eat Your Yard Jax has made it its goal to teach the local community how a yard can be a great source of food. Their mission statement is: "A yard should be more than a postage stamp sterile environment. It should be a place that feeds mind, body and spirit, a place to share nature with children, family and neighbors."

Tim Armstrong, agro specialist and owner of Eat Your Yard Jax, is involved in multiple efforts throughout the community to teach people how to apply agro techniques for food production. He runs a farm-nursery, teaches classes and workshops, sells produce at The Farmers Market every Saturday, volunteers at the North Florida School of Education's Berry Good Farms, and is also an independent contractor for Eat Your Yard Jax.

Eat Your Yard Jax is a unique company that gives people who are interested in learning about edible gardening the opportunity to hire Armstrong and members of his team to come teach them how to grow edible food on their property. When instructing someone on how to grow their own

food, Armstrong considers the allotted space a person has, the environmental terrain their land is on, and the amount of time and money they are willing to put into their harvest.

Armstrong believes that, when it comes to farming, knowledge is power. While growing edible food can be a fun and simple process, it is also a methodical one – taking things such as space, terrain and upkeep into consideration is essential to the growing process.

"It's important to be aware of what plants will grow in the area you are trying to garden," Armstrong explained, "because obviously, different crops grow in sand than grow in soil. Different plants grow in North Florida than in South Florida. Through Eat Your Yard Jax, I help teach people what they are able to grow based on these different factors, to help them create a sustainable and fruitful garden."

All of the techniques that Armstrong utilizes are organic and sustainable, which not only eliminates the need for things such as toxic pesticides, but also keeps his farm's carbon footprint small.

Composting is a great technique Armstrong practices both on his own farm and on Berry

Good Farms. Composting recycles organic waste through a process that decomposes the materials into a natural pesticide for soil. Vermiculture, or worm harvesting, is a type of composting that utilizes various worms to speed up the decomposing process. Berry Good Farms harvests over 10,000 earthworms that help enrich the soil with organic nutrients.

Armstrong, a licensed aquaculturist and fish farmer, also uses aquaponics as a food production system. Aquaponics is a system that takes advantage of the symbiotic relationship between aquatic animals and plants that can be cultivated in water (hydroponics). On Berry Good Farms, Armstrong farms tilapia in large bins in the greenhouse, where the filtered water from the hydroponics system is recirculated. And to further make use of his resources, whenever these bins are emptied, Armstrong and his students on the farm water the nursery.

Another symbiotic relationship that Armstrong pays attention to when gardening is the relationship between companion plants. Companion plants are plants that grow better together, so it can be very useful to pay attention to these relationships when planning a garden. For example, if you were thinking of growing strawberries, you might also want to consider growing the herb borage, as it is notorious for fending off pests that can be very harmful to the strawberry plant.

On Armstrong's farm-nursery, his favorite things to grow are mushrooms. Mushrooms make the most sense for his environment because he has

a lot of wood reclamation on his property. To make use of this discarded wood, he harvests mushrooms on them.

"Mushrooms are easy to grow, they make sense for my property, and they are delicious," said Armstrong.

Armstrong volunteers with the gardening program at the North Florida School of Special Education two days a week, where his son is a student. What started out as a small gardening workshop has grown into a decent sized farm located on the school's grounds, known as Berry Good Farms. Berry Good Farms is run by students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities who are in the school's transitional program.

The school has a 30' x 60' greenhouse and garden area where students and staff grow edible plants, flowers, fruits, vegetables and herbs. Some of the things grown on Berry Good Farms include pine-apples, olives, blueberries, strawberries, basil, edible flowers, peas, gogi berries, and many more.

Armstrong attributes the growth and success of Berry Good Farms to the students' hard work, as well as generous donations from the community.

"The community outreach with the program has been overwhelming," he said.

The school also offers a weekly culinary class during which students learn how to make food with ingredients found in the garden, such as lettuce wraps, dips, jellies and jams.

In the spring, Berry Good Farms has its Fish Fry Fundraiser to raise money for the farm. Students and staff will fry all of the tilapia they have farmed and serve it alongside other delicacies grown on the grounds to guests. This gives attendees the chance to see the students' hard work, and lets them eat a healthy, organic meal that is native to the North Florida region.

Armstrong also sells produce at the Jarboe Park Farmers Market in Neptune Beach every Saturday from 2 - 6 p.m. He sees the market as a great networking environment for the organic practices he is inspiring in the community.


More information about Armstrong's company can be found on its Facebook page, Eat Your Yard Jax, or the company's website: EatYourYardJax.com. From the website, you can subscribe to the newsletter for information about upcoming workshops, as well as helpful hints for organic gardening practices. 

Photo by: Crystal Floyd



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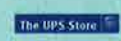
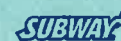
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