

Keep Your Money

by Julie Silva

This time of year, garden centers and gardeners are hopping. Plants, fertilizers, soil amendments, and garden tools are being loaded into waiting vehicles. Someone, somewhere on some social media site will quip about all the work and money to raise a tomato plant that provides \$2.17 worth of tomatoes. That joke isn't funny when you're standing at the grocery store checkout.

How can you help control food costs? Going back to the joke about tomatoes, grocery stores in our area do not sell cheap tomatoes. How does that compare to your ability to grow food in your yard? Seed packages of high-quality vegetables range from \$2.99 to \$5.99, often with free shipping. Packages have between 10 to 100 seeds, depending on the variety. Common tomato varieties such as Early Girls will produce quickly (58 days from transplant); in 2023 they continued producing in my location through December. The flavor is beyond compare.

Cucumbers are easy to grow. A fresh lunchbox cucumber will dazzle you. At the grocery store we all search for a cucumber that is not mushy or old. Going into your garden and picking your own cucumber will provide several surprises. First, the crunch. Second, you can actually smell the flavor. Third, you will not be paying \$1.48 a piece for them.

Peppers are another long producer. Red bell peppers (peppers allowed to mature on the plant) are \$1.98 per pepper. There is a pepper from Baker Seeds named Leysa. Leysa has thick walls, turns red and is as delicious as valentine's candy. Yes, they are heart shaped. You will not find them in stores.

Once you start growing your own, your palate will change. Flavor becomes foremost. You will laugh at \$1.98 bell peppers. You will turn your back on tomatoes with no flavor.

Where to start? Come to Open Garden Day with Master Gardeners in Tuolumne or Calaveras County. Look for us at farmer's markets. Check out our website (https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/). Save your pocket book, teach yourself and your children, and enjoy your meals in a different way.

Here are a few tips for growing your own food:

1. Designate a permanent garden area; even a pot on a patio can grow food.
2. Educate yourself. Bananas are not known to produce in Mi-Wuk Village.
3. Grow things you and your family want to eat.
4. Find help with Master Gardeners and local nursery experts.
5. Find solace in digging in your dirt and enjoying family time together.

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University of California Cooperative Extension Central Sierra Master Gardeners can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 in Tuolumne County, 209-754-2880 in Calaveras County or fill out our [easy-to-use problem questionnaire](https://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269) (<https://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269>). Check out our [UCCE Master Gardener webpage](https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/) (https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/). You can find us on Facebook, on the radio at kaad-lp.org or 103.5 FM on Motherlode Community Radio and also on You Tube.

