



# Grow Your Own Food Year Round with the Tower Garden

By Lori Tremblay

I love our Tower Garden. It's a wonderful way to take control of our food sources. Going to the grocery store now is an uncertain experience. Shoppers wonder, how much have the prices gone up and what is actually available on the shelves? Do we really want to buy produce shipped from South Africa? That can't be very fresh or nutritious. In New England, during the winter, we can't get local, fresh produce, or can we?

I love to garden, to grow fresh vegetables in the sun and harvest them. I love to go to the farmers' markets in the summer and enjoy local, fresh produce. In the late fall and winter, most of us can't do that.

About ten years ago, my husband and I had a balcony and didn't have the space for a garden. We decided to try the Tower Garden, an aeroponic, indoor and outdoor home gardening system that lets you grow fresh, nutritious fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers any time of year. We had it outside during the summer and inside during the winter, with grow lights added.

The first year, we grew tomatoes in the summer. We added about three tomato plants in the bottom ports, which morphed into giant, sprawling vines of prolific tomatoes. They were delicious, but we had too many! We needed to add water to the 20-gallon basin often, which contained the minerals and nutrients added to nourish the plants' roots. Those tomatoes were thirsty! So we learned to balance the needs of the plants, herbs, fruits and flowers that we grew. We had 20 ports to plant seedlings in and we could have a variety of fresh produce.

I was excited to be able to snip just the herbs or salad greens that I needed, without wasting an entire package bought at the store. I noticed that the taste was much fresher. When we grew celery, it was dark green and very flavorful, unlike the pale green stalks I was used to from the store. Everything had a fresher flavor

and deeper color. An older friend tasted the lettuce and said, "This is what I remember from my grandmother's garden."

During the winter, we added grow lights to the Tower Garden as we took it inside. It was so exciting to have fresh herbs, greens and other vegetables in the winter. We enjoyed delicious salads during a snowstorm and it was so gratifying.

Later, we moved and had the Tower Garden in the back yard in the summer. A special visitor was a praying mantis, who made her home on my Tulsi basil. We watched with interest as she found a mate and unfortunately, he lost his life (females kill the males after mating). This is the way of the praying mantis mating ritual. She left a circular nest of eggs, which we moved to safety when we took the Tower Garden inside for the winter. I used the Tulsi basil for tea and herbal recipes.

The Tower Garden is simple, with a basin for water and miner-



als, a tower with ports for planting seedlings, and a pump to pump the water, which then rains down on the plants' roots. You add minerals and nutrients to the water. You also need to check the pH balance of the water.

Tim Blank, cofounder and chief technical officer for The Tower Garden Company, invented the Tower Garden.

He has a degree in horticulture and a 12-year career at The Land at Disney's Epcot Center. In 2012, Blank partnered with The Juice Plus Company, maker of whole food nutritional products, to make the Tower Garden available for residential use. Blank said, "You don't have to be an expert, but you can still grow your own clean, healthy food at home." He also said, "The future of food is growing up instead of out."

Some see vertical farms as an answer to future growing, not needing as much land or water and also, having the ability to grow

more food in urban environments. Dr. Dickson Despommier, microbiologist, an ecologist and emeritus professor of Public and Environmental Health at Columbia University and author of "The Vertical Farm: Feeding the World in the 21st Century," has a similar vision. He said, "If successfully implemented, they (vertical farms) offer the promise of urban renewal, sustainable production of a safe and varied food supply and the eventual repair of ecosystems that have been sacrificed for horizontal farming." In the book, Despommier shows how abandoned buildings in urban areas can be used to establish vertical growing farms on multiple levels. Food is produced efficiently, safely (without the threat of diseases or contaminants), and abundantly.

Lolli Leeson, a National Marketing Director with The Juice Plus Company and chef, said "American families desperately want solutions and choice in being able to obtain nutritious, home-grown, organic, vine-ripened and GMO-free food. In today's world, that is not easy." Lolli and her husband, Bob, built a greenhouse by their home in Massachusetts for their Tower Gardens. The Leesons are passionate about educating others about the benefits of healthy food.

The Tower Gardens can be used in so many ways. In schools, they have been very successful in showing children how to grow their own food and to enjoy the process. Free curriculum is provided to schools to help teachers incorporate valuable lesson plans around the growing process. Students get excited when they are involved in the process and get to eat what they have grown.

Stephen Ritz, an enthusiastic, award winning teacher, sponsored an organization called the Green Bronx Machine. Ritz was a Top Ten Finalist for the Global Teacher Prize, named Global Humanitarian, Food Tank Hero, TedX Prize Winner and a Global Food Educator. A replica of his classroom was installed in the US Botanic Gardens in Washington, DC.

Ritz began growing food in the classrooms in an inner-city school in the Bronx, which inspired the students to get involved, eat what they grew and become healthier. There was an increased success rate in the classroom and the students have given back to their communities. They learn where their food comes from and how it grows. Ritz uses Tower Gardens in the classroom and speaks to groups nationwide about the importance of nutrition for children and families ([www.greenbronxmachine.org](http://www.greenbronxmachine.org)). I have heard Ritz speak and his enthusiasm is palpable.

Lolli Leeson pointed out the many possibilities of the Tower Garden. "It is great for an older couple that can't physically tend to a garden anymore, the condo owner with a sunny balcony, the restaurant owner who spends a lot of money on organic produce and herbs, a school classroom or the busy family."

Even if you don't have a green thumb, the Tower Garden is easy to use. There is no weeding, kneeling or digging in the dirt. You also don't waste any food, because you pick what you need and the plant keeps growing. You can grow everything except root vegetables, tubers (like potatoes), or tree type plants, such as blackberry or raspberry bushes. Grow the things that you love to eat. The nutrient content is the best when you pick what you need and bring it right to the table.

Tim Blank said, "Take control of your own food supply. Get more healthy produce. If you grow it in your kitchen, you'll harvest it every day."

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