

What's the Cost of Gardening?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I grew up the youngest of five children on a farm with a big orchard and garden. We planted a half acre of potatoes every year. When we harvested them we filled lot's of gunny sacks that went into the root cellar. My mom canned hundreds of pints and quarts of fruits and vegetables and froze enough to fill up a big chest deep freeze. Making sauerkraut was one of my favorite times of summer! At the time I just assumed that everyone did this. Later on I realized that it was one of the ways that my parents could afford to feed five kids!

In recent years we've seen a resurgence in home gardening. The pandemic has certainly accelerated the trend but it started several years before that. For pandemic gardeners it was something that could be safely done, outside, often a family activity. We've long known that children are more likely to eat vegetables if they helped to grow them. For others, there is a certain sense of reassurance in knowing how that food has been grown and knowing what pesticides were or weren't used. For some of us there is the satisfaction of growing our own food for better flavor, to grow a specific variety of vegetable or to simply have something fresher than what you can get in a grocery store. Every single one of these are good and valid reasons to garden.

But the one that always makes me scratch my head and question is when someone says they want to garden to save money. When I hear this I immediately wonder if they've ever spent much time tracking their expenses. I grow a lot of garlic. Yes, it's a hobby, okay a little more than a hobby as I produced nearly 18 pounds of garlic last year. I use some of my garlic for planting but I also buy certified "seed" garlic bulbs every year. Depending on the variety and how well it did for me those varieties worked out to be \$4 to \$8 a pound for the finished product. This does not include the expense of the fertilizer, irrigation or any of my time in the planting, tending, or processing. I can go to a grocery store and buy garlic for less than that \$4 per pound.

I don't grow my own garlic to save money. I grow my own garlic to explore different types and different cultivars. I grow my own because I know that what you will generally buy in the grocery store is from California or Mexico and it's probably one of about five different commercial varieties that are used because of long storage life and high yield. I can grow the gourmet hard necked varieties with really big cloves, that will only store for three or four months but have taste that you won't match with grocery store bought garlic. Then I can also plant some varieties, mainly soft necked types, that will last 9 to 12 months. I will still using the very end of last year's crop in June just before I start harvesting the current year's crop.

This is just the start of it all though. If you plan to can or freeze some of the produce you grow, how much more does that add on to the cost? If, like my mother, you had dozens of jars, (which were treated like gold and don't you dare drop one!) a pressure canner, rings and lids then the annual cost was fairly low, mainly new lids, and each year you reused them the fixed cost kept going down. But if you have to buy all new equipment the first year cost will be quite high!

This is the first year in a few decades that I've really been able to garden. I'm going to try to keep track of all my costs from seed to fertilizer, an estimate of time and even cost to water when it gets dry. I'd encourage you to do the same, that is IF you think you are gardening to save money. I can provide some simple forms to help you figure your cost. Or maybe just do like I do, and grow the garden for the fun of it and the fresh taste and don't worry about the cost!