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News Release

What flavor is your garden?

Question: There are so many different kinds of gardens that I don't know which type to develop. A basic 'vanilla' garden sounds simpler, but kind of boring. Can I add a few "sprinkles" to my garden without committing myself to a lot more time or money?

Answer: While I like 'vanilla' too, especially the 'vanilla bean' kind, variety is supposedly "the spice of life." Most of us develop our own blend of garden designs and garden focus to reflect our personalities and interests.

While most gardens are basically family-oriented, meaning they are developed around an individual family or user, there are increasing numbers of gardens described as 'multi-user gardens.' These gardens fall in the category of "community garden," and can be associated with churches, schools, neighborhood groups and service organizations. Community gardens are developed with user groups in mind, whether senior citizens, working parents, youth, or other groups are participating.

Although "back yard" gardens can technically be located anywhere, including the front of our property, they tend to be theme gardens. Popular choices in this area include gardens designed to attract pollinators, such as birds, butterflies, and bees. These gardens usually include native plant materials, as regionally native plants are best for wildlife that have coevolved and formed relationships with them [plants] over time. And if the term "native" confuses or troubles us, for this article, let's define it as "a species that occurs naturally in a region and/or habitat without direct or indirect human intervention." A back yard garden dedicated to particular animals, be it birds, squirrels, deer or butterflies, definitely adds "flavor" to a landscape. In addition to the colors, scents, and activities it offers and attracts, it creates a way-station or sanctuary for the creatures visiting there.

Theme gardens have been around for hundreds of years, from the highly geometric Knot garden to Shakespearean and Biblical gardens. These gardens are popular with gardeners who don't mind giving the extra care and maintenance these designs need to look their best, and who like the more formal appearance of them. Many of these gardens incorporate lots of herbs and perennials, and while these are not primarily wildlife gardens, many herbs and native perennials attract butterflies, birds, and honey bees.

With the trend toward growing more of our own food, vegetable and fruit gardens are appearing in more landscapes than we've experienced since Victory Garden days. Fruit trees, many of

which are blooming this time of year, remind us of our dependence on pollinators while they wow us with flowering displays. Pear, peach, apple, crabapple and quince, followed by blackberries, blueberries and raspberries, are best eaten as fresh as possible. If we don't grow them ourselves, we can visit a Farmers Market to find locally grown varieties.

While Central Alabama can be a difficult area to grow some fruits, most vegetables are right at home here. And some varieties of pepper, Swiss chard, lettuce and tomato are colorful and attractive enough to be featured in back or front yard. In that case, the garden segues into an "edible landscape," yet another "flavor" to try. In addition to the 'look what I did' factor, fresh "veggies", like fresh fruit, usually taste better and are healthier than processed forms. So try a few bean, pepper, tomato, squash, eggplant and melon varieties this year – you may be surprised with the results.

Multi-user gardens or Community Gardens are not new. This type of garden has been around for many years. We tend to think of community gardens belonging to densely populated urban areas, but they don't have to be. In fact, "communal gardens" were popular not so many years ago (think back to the '60s if you can). Although the trend slowed for a few decades, we are currently experiencing a new interest in the concept. What is a community garden? It can be a single piece of land gardened collectively by a group of people, or a shared space in a neighborhood where residents who live in apartments or houses without suitable yards can have a place to grow vegetables, herbs, and fruits. Some definitions of community gardens include 'even be home to chicken keeping'!

Many of these gardens were initiated or evolved into sources of food grown and managed by faith-based organizations or neighborhood associations. Even youth groups have gotten involved, growing and sharing or selling produce from their enterprise to their neighborhoods or local Farmers Markets.

For more about this topic please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email leesall@aces.edu.

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