

IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

BY SHARON DOERRE

GARDENING INSIDE THE BOX

Lukas Hjallbring was just two-going-on-three in the spring of 2006, but already suffering from what his parents, Henrik and Debbi, suspected was “nature-deficit disorder.” They’d first heard the phrase in Richard Louv’s *Small Child in the Woods*, and it struck a chord.

“We tried to get him outside as much as possible,” Debbi recalls, “but he practically got kicked out of Kindermusik because he couldn’t sit still. He’d always rather go to the greenbelt than any organized anything.”

The question of how to get Lukas closer to nature was solved when Henrik checked out a library book on square-foot gardening—the intensive raised-bed method proven to produce better plants, in less space than traditional vegetable gardens require.

Despite living in a rented Travis Heights duplex with a small, sloped yard, Henrik and Debbi found room for a square-foot-gardening box made simply from wood and weed-block fabric. They got busy.

In one small, four-by-four-foot container, the family planted basil, tomatoes, eggplant, bell peppers, and more. “Lukas got to sprout radish seeds in plastic bags,” Debbi says. “He got to plant his own seedlings, watch them grow, and then eat the radishes.”

The Kjallbrings had won their battle against nature-deficit disorder, and the garden was a success—and what began as one family’s effort to garden in a small yard with poor soil has turned into a neighborhood pastime, with garden boxes sprouting up throughout the southeast side of the neighborhood.

First, parents with babies and toddlers in strollers began stopping to admire the Kjallbring’s box garden from the street.

“People were always saying, ‘that’s great! How did you do that?’” Henrik remembers.

“Maybe we should have a little workshop and show people,” Debbi decided. Soon, an e-invitation went out to the neigh-

borhood playgroup: “Welcome to Glendale’s first BYOB—Build Your Own Box—Party!”

On a warm September morning, six months after the Kjallbrings built their own box, five families gathered for breakfast and garden-building. Adapting the principles he’d learned from Mel Bartholomew’s book *Square Foot Gardening*, Henrik came up with a simple construction design. He kept down costs by searching for wood in the odd-cut pile at Home Depot, pre-cut the wood and pre-drilled the holes.

Henrik took charge of box assembly in the front yard, while Debbi and neighbor Wendy Dhillon mixed soil on a tarp in the backyard. Parents traded off caring for children ranging in age from six months to three years, and the project began in an atmosphere of cooperative fun—and tacos.

“Someone brought fruit salad and someone brought tea and we had breakfast and coffee,” Debbi says. “Everyone got to know each other.”

And each family went home with a garden box to place in a permanent location. A few hours later, Debbi arrived with a soil mix comprised of peat moss, compost and vermiculite—all purchased in bulk from the Natural Gardener.

A riot of fall crops was planted in that soil—lettuce, basil, cabbages, herbs and flowers. Toddlers all over the neighborhood weeded, watered and ate. Party participant Jayne Hayden enjoyed watching her three-and-a-half-year-old son, Wyatt, learn about nature.

“It was educational,” she says. “Learning what *wouldn’t* grow as well as what would.”

Wyatt’s enthusiasm is clear. “Plants!” he says, bouncing up and down.

“And what do they grow into?” his mother asks. “Vegetables!”



BUILD YOUR OWN BOX

Building a garden box is easy and inexpensive. Here’s how:

Materials:

- 4 2x6 planks, each cut into 4-foot sections.
- 12 coarse-thread deck screws. Each screw should be twice as long as the thickness of the wood—3” for a 2x6.
- Power drill
- Weed cloth
- Staple gun (optional)
- 8 cubic feet of soil mix: 1/3 peat moss, 1/3 vermiculite, and 1/3 compost.

Directions:

1. Pre-drill 3 holes in the side of each board at one end.
2. Screw the boards together end-to-end with the deck

screws, rotating corners (attach the end of one board to the side of the other) until you have a complete square.

3. Staple the weed cloth to the bottom of the frame or place the weed cloth on the ground at your selected garden spot.
4. Fill the box with the soil mix, watering as you fill to ensure that the soil settles. Wood lath or string can be used to divide the box into square-foot sections or you can leave the space open.
5. Add seeds or plants.

More on box gardens:

Hope Davis of the Farmstead in Leverett, Massachusetts, sells complete kits for assembling mortise-and-tenon garden beds.

Go to gardenraisedbeds.com or call 800-515-0745.