



Joan James of A Backyard Farm shows Michael Miller and children Audrey, left, Elliot and Isaac how to get the most out of the raised garden beds they have planted in their Highland Park backyard. PHOTOS BY ANNE BRANDRUD

Pickers and choosers

Mac-Groveland pair show city dwellers how to turn their backyards into miniature farms

BY NANCY CROTTI

Michael and Kimberly Miller had planted a vegetable garden before they had children, but once the Highland Park couple's three kids came along, they knew they would be hard-pressed to find the time to be able to maintain one.

The Millers did not want to sign up for a share in a community-supported farm again after receiving more bok choy one year than they could ever hope to eat. But they wanted a vegetable garden, preferably one that could involve their children Audrey, 5, Elliot, 3, and eventually Isaac, who is 7 months old.

This past spring, they saw a flyer published by a new company called A Backyard Farm and called the owners, Joan

James and Coleen Gregor of Macalester-Groveland. James, a teacher at Roosevelt High School and a former nanny, and Gregor, a former southern Minnesota farm girl who now heads a Stillwater adoption agency, started A Backyard Farm to help urban families grow organic produce with as much or as little help as the families desire.

James and Gregor have maintained plots in the Eleanor Graham Community Garden at Ayd Mill Road and Hamline Avenue for the past 15 years and had watched sadly as families struggled to keep up with the pests, weeding and harvesting. Last fall, they went online and discovered companies in San Francisco and Oregon that were planting organic gardens in other people's backyards and decided to bring the concept

to the Twin Cities.

In February, with no customers lined up, Gregor started seeds for 1,000 plants in a friend's basement. She and James made up flyers and distributed them around the metropolitan area. Since then they have installed 27 raised garden beds, including 15 in the immediate area. Of those 15, A Backyard Farm is tending is 10 and its clients are tending the rest. (A Minneapolis nonprofit organization, A Backyard Harvest, provides a similar service.)

James builds raised garden beds of pine or cedar and lays a weed barrier beneath each bed before filling them with a mixture of peat moss, vermiculite and five to six types of compost. "Every type

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of compost brings a different nutrient to the soil," she explained. "We get our compost from major growers. It's all organic."

She and a handful of independent contractors visit the gardens once a week to weed, feed, harvest and plant new crops if families want the help. The price for the service ranges from \$200 to \$800 for the season depending on the size of the beds, type of wood used to build them and amount of service desired.

"Our job is to teach clients who want to learn to garden," James said. "Our job is not to have people be dependent on us."

The Millers were concerned that hiring a gardener might seem bourgeois, but were impressed with James' and Gregor's passion, sincerity and eagerness to involve the children. They thought that having someone work with their children in their own backyard garden would be a fun summer activity.

Thee Millers' yard now holds two 2-by-8-foot raised garden beds, one each for Audrey and Elliot. "The kids really like it, and they really, really like Joan and Coleen," Michael Miller said. "It's given our kids a unique and personal source for gardening and getting excited about agriculture. Being city folks, we thought that was important."

Rebecca Abas of Macalester-Groveland felt the same way about getting her and her husband Bruce's 4-year-old daughter Bijou involved in gardening. Rebecca also wanted to learn gardening and have more control over the source of her family's food.

"I know where it's coming from," she said. "I know who's touching it. I know how it's processed."

Bijou also enjoys the gardeners' visits. "She just loves the garden gals," Rebecca said.

The Abas family has two raised beds, each measuring 3-by-8 feet. James built each of those beds pyramid-style to allow potatoes, leeks and carrots enough soil depth to grow without penetrating the yard. She also con-



Audrey Miller, 5, holds some of the morning harvest.

structed a trellis system of metal pipes and tomato netting to allow the taller plants to grow upward and allow the other plants to get enough sunlight. Most crops require six to eight hours of sun a day, which Gregor said can be a challenge in some St. Paul neighborhoods that have many mature trees.

Rebecca Abas is impressed with her family's new gardens, which also grow broccoli, beets, lettuce, rosemary, thyme, parsley, cutting celery, butternut squash, cucumbers and red cabbage. It is a far cry from what she laughingly described as her "disaster of a tomato garden" from last summer.

James and Gregor want to install more garden beds this fall. That way they will be all set to begin warming the soil in March with plastic tents and planting the first crops in April. (For information, visit abackyardfarm.com.)

"We push Mother Nature as much as we can in Minnesota," Gregor said. "There's a whole spring crop that you can get in before everybody else has their garden in. If the bed goes in this fall, you can hit the ground running."