



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

## Learn to Garden: A Green Thumb Investment with Big Payoffs

Bob Randall

Almost every week, I meet someone who tells me “I always kill plants” or “I wasn’t born with a green thumb.” I often respond “neither was I,” or I sometimes say that no maternity ward in the world has babies with green colored thumbs. Rather we learn our horticultural skills the same way we learn to read—by hard work, making mistakes, an ounce of inspiration, and with the help of grandmothers, friends, or teachers. I often say, “There are a hundred ways to garden right and a thousand ways to garden wrong.” The trick is to learn one or two ways that get the job done in a way that satisfies you.

So how do you develop a green thumb? In a nutshell: take courses, use books, look before you leap, and practice with others. Master Gardening Classes are published in the Saturday Houston Chronicle Garden Calendar, including listings for excellent classes and public talks. In general, you will learn more at the lengthier talks than at short ones, and at the courses which go on for weeks or months.

One excellent place to start is the Master Gardener course at your local county cooperative extension. These are multiple week sessions that cover the full range of basic issues in gardening. Once you graduate, there is follow-up learning as well.

To find out what is offered at your county extension and when, call them or email them. Search online for cooperative extension information for your county.

### Urban Harvest Classes

Urban Harvest offers a wide range of mainly organic topics for both the novice and the intermediate gardener. For those just starting gardening, the best place is the fall Basics Of Gardening series. There is also a winter Building Your Backyard Orchard Series covering all the fruits that grow easily and well here. This starts with my class on tangerines, oranges, and other citrus and continues with classes on other fruit and their care. There is also a free summary class on all fruit before the big Fruit Tree Sale held each January.

There are also: a spring class on Growing Organic Vegetables, a permaculture class in spring on Ecological Landscaping, and a four course 75 hour full year curriculum in Permaculture (sustainable design).

## Books

Another good way is to learn gardening from books. Books written by local authors are especially useful since they have advice that works in the Houston area. Only skilled gardeners can use out of the area books without problems.

Some good ones written for our area include:

- Bill Adams and Tom LeRoy (Commonsense Vegetable Gardening in the South; Growing Fruits and Nuts in the South: The Definitive Guide);
- Mark Bowen (Habitat Gardening for Houston; Naturalistic Landscaping for the Gulf Coast);
- Karen Breneman (Gardening with Nature in Texas);
- John Foster (All About Trees: in and Around Houston);
- Kathy Huber (The Texas Flowerscaper: A Seasonal Guide to Bloom, Height, Color, and Texture (with Lynn Peterson);
- Dr. Bob Randall (Year Round Vegetables, Fruits and Flowers for Metro-Houston);
- The River Oaks Garden Club (A Garden Book for Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast);
- Brenda Beust Smith (The Lazy Gardener's Guide, Gardening with Dogs);
- Sally McQueen Squires (The Complete Guide to Growing Bulbs in Houston).

## Seeing Plants Growing

One of the most annoying things for a gardener is to work hard growing a flowering shrub, a fruit, or a vegetable only to find out it isn't pretty, doesn't taste good, is much too big for the site, or is otherwise unsuitable.

To prevent this, first go see plants growing to get an idea how they look and how big they are. As well, if the plant produces something edible, taste it first. You can see many plants growing at regional Arboretums and Nature Centers such as Mercer, The Houston Arboretum, The Lowry Arboretum at Rice University, and Armand Bayou. You can also see demonstration ornamental and food gardens at the Cooperative Extensions as does Urban Harvest at its central Houston office. It is also possible to taste fruits and vegetables at occasional tasting events both at Extension and at Urban Harvest. Galveston has a citrus tasting Dec. 9. You can also purchase locally grown produce to taste at the Bayou City Farmers Market on Saturday mornings 3000 Richmond.

## Learning by Doing

Most of the classes mentioned above have hands-on-learning opportunities and requirements. For most beginning gardeners this is not enough. One of the best ways to learn gardening is to join a community garden that works at a convenient time in a location near you. There are more than 150 in the Houston area stretching from Galveston to Magnolia. Many are at schools. You can help start a community garden so that your community can learn.

When you garden with others, you can learn from them. Gardening is rewarding, and the more you know the more rewarding it gets.