

Shelby O'Toole

ELKIN, N. C.

Seeing Shelby O'Toole's container vegetable garden reminds you of one of a true gardener's attributes—resourcefulness. Growing vegetables in containers is not a unique concept, but the remarkable thing about her garden is that two of her many containers were used to grow corn.

This resident of Elkin, N.C., has grown ornamental plants and vegetables for years. In the past, a tilled corner of the back yard served as her garden. The long distance from a water source combined with a dog who loved to dig created the need for an alternative place to plant.

Containers filled that need nicely. The container garden on the back deck has cucumbers, squash, two types of tomatoes, green beans and of course, corn. So why corn? Her answer was pretty simple: "Why not corn?"

Anyone with a fondness for fresh vegetables loves just-picked corn. While corn is not exactly a common container plant, growing it was relatively simple.

Shelby started with a pack of seed corn from a local garden center. The seeds were started in peat discs and transplanted into 14-inch containers when the seedlings were about four inches tall. She filled the pots with a vegetable/flower potting mix, a luxury not enjoyed by most garden-variety corn.


The deck is west-facing, so adequate sun was not a problem. The hot, dry summer weather made regular, almost daily, watering necessary. Fertilizer was provided with a water-soluble plant food. As far as pollination, she let nature take its course.

Anticipating large plants, round tomato cages were set in place while the plants were still young. There were no pest problems evident on the corn, but she did have to dust the beans once to treat

for beetles, so the corn got a treatment also.

So how did it taste? Shelby says her two five-foot-tall plants yielded about 15 ears. They were admittedly small and the kernels were not too firm, but it tasted just fine cut from the cob.

I neglected to mention the other reason for her persistence. Shelby took a lot of ribbing from her family about growing corn on the deck, so failure was not an option. Which brings to mind another one of a true gardener's attributes—we can be a little stubborn at times.

What's next for this inventive gardener? Shelby plans to do it again this year of course, only with a couple more plants and larger pots. At this rate, husband Vernon may be adding on to the deck soon. 

Randy Tulbert also lives and gardens in Elkin, N.C. He has written for various publications and served as editor and writer for Lowe.com.



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Containers of corn join the more traditional fare of tomatoes and flowers on Shelby's back deck.

Who's Your Favorite Gardener?

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