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## Family's homegrown diet starts in their backyard



Photo: G.J. McCarthy / Staff Photographer

Stephanie Weyenberg involves children Anna and Abby (right) in tending the vegetable garden.

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Published 02 February 2011 10:10 AM

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Matthew Weyenberg, a family physician in Plano, educates his patients about living a healthy lifestyle, stressing the importance of exercising and a nutritious diet. At home in Prosper, he takes his own advice with his wife, Stephanie, and their three children. One cornerstone of their commitment to healthy living is planted right in their backyard.

A large fruit and vegetable garden runs up one side of the sprawling lot, and a row of fruit trees brings up the rear. There is not a lot blooming in the garden since freezes have moved through, but Stephanie points to the sturdy Swiss chard and the patch of onions she is preparing to harvest.

Matt, 36, says his wife is the driving force behind their commitment to living closer to the land. Although the family always ate well, their middle child, Abby, began experiencing digestive problems about three years ago. Stephanie, 37, decided to see if a more natural diet would help alleviate her daughter's symptoms. They reduced the amount of processed foods they were eating and planted a garden.

The plan was not an immediate success. "It does take some experimenting to see what plants will work," Stephanie says. So when she finds a fruit or vegetable that flourishes on their property, she tends to stick with it. Swiss chard, for example, is rich in vitamins and minerals, has a long growing season, and thrives without much attention, so it has a prominent place in the garden.

Matt says the children's favorites are blackberries and cherry tomatoes. "The tomatoes were very sweet last summer. We'd look out in the backyard and see the kids eating the tomatoes right off the vine." But even with a successful tomato crop, the processes still are being tweaked.

"The first year we had a terrible crop because it was so hot and I simply couldn't water them enough," Stephanie says. "This year we put in a very simple drip-irrigation system with a timer and it made all the difference." They also experimented with beefsteak tomatoes planted in bags of potting soil with holes punched in the sides of the bags for drainage. "The tomato plants were almost 8 feet tall."

Along with the tomatoes and Swiss chard, the Weyenbergs grow lettuce, strawberries, squash, basil and peppers in their proper seasons. The fruit trees began yielding fruit last summer, their third year of growth. The family also participates in a fruit and vegetable co-op to supplement what they grow. To keep other aspects of their diet healthful, they buy fresh dairy products from Layla Farms in Plano and, since in-laws run a grass-fed cattle farm, the family has been purchasing beef from them, which is packaged and frozen.

run a grass-fed cattle farm, the family has been purchasing beef from them, which is packaged and frozen to eat throughout the year.

The Weyenbergs also keep a dozen chickens. Their movable coop can be rolled to different parts of the backyard, which keeps the lawn green and allows the chickens to keep down the insect population.

"The chickens rule the backyard. Even the cats and the dog stay out of their way," Matt says. The children interact with the chickens and have named each one. The kids also have a thriving business selling extra eggs to their grandparents.

The Weyenbergs add new foods to their garden as they learn. Stephanie has been grinding her own wheat for flour for more than a year. Her first recipe using it was for waffles, and the whole family, she says, was surprised at how delicious and light the texture was. That has them considering growing their own wheat again this year.

Jam and dehydrated vegetables also appear on the Weyenberg table. "The peppers from our garden were a big success," Stephanie says, "but the cherry tomatoes are a little odd. They're almost like tomato raisins."

Matt says that positive results from their homegrown food has made him even more of an advocate in his practice. "I'm encouraging my patients to read labels and to try eating more fruits and vegetables; preferably local ones. For many of them it has helped them lose weight and feel better.

"We're certainly not perfect at this," Matt continues. "The family has the occasional meal out and we still have to buy things at the grocery store. But it's a process and we keep adding to it. We didn't start out as gardeners or natural foodies. But as we've read more and learned more and Stephanie has tried different things, this has really become a way of life."

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