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Lauri Madanay, left, and Fran Butera work in Madanay's home garden. Butera, of Foodscapes Hawaii, is a landscaper who designed the edible garden.

Pandemic produce: Food insecurity concerns give rise to edible gardens

By Steven Mark Feb. 28, 2021

When COVID-19 hit last year, Lauri Madanay, a retired nurse, decided to focus her skills on the pandemic and contracted with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to work at the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport. But by September, she felt "inundated with COVID."

"I needed an outlet, something fun," she said. "I needed some light."

So she contacted Fran Butera of Foodscapes Hawaii, who focuses on designing edible gardens. Just a few months later, Madanay is harvesting lettuce, tomatoes, herbs and other produce from a small raised bed she built on her lawn in Wailupe. "It's quite fun, but also the best part is, this is my dinner," she said. "I get a salad that I bring to work every night."

Madanay is among the latest to join in the edible garden movement, which has been burgeoning on the islands in recent years, as food securities issues have loomed. With the pandemic creating extra incentive in the form of stress, local landscapers are making the effort more viable than ever with innovative methods and renewed dedication.

"I wanted to grow a garden," said Madanay. "But I also wanted to eat it. I didn't want to go the grocery store and I didn't really have time to go the grocery store, so what can I do that's kind of fun? But that I can also eat."

Madanay had tried growing edibles before, without much success. So with Butera's help, she figured out a good place to install a raised bed, building it herself. Although she's since found that she built it "a bit too close to the house, so there's too much shade," she's started growing other plants in pots, which she's placed in sunnier areas.

There's a lot of experimentation going on. Madanay planted radishes from seed in her raised bed and found they grew slowly, so she'll replant them in pots. "It's like I'm doing science all the time," she said.

Butera has designed and built gardens in a variety of urban settings, carefully analyzing each site to see what will work best, at times even consulting the compass on her iPhone to help determine how to orient a garden.

"Everybody's place is different, even in the same neighborhood, from yard to yard," she said. "In one yard it'll be bright and sunny, and the other it'll be shady and the house will be blocking the winter sun."

For Butera, following up with her clients is key to the garden's success. She'll meet with them monthly for its first year, guiding her client from first planting to harvesting and replanting. Although she's happy to help clients grow what they want, she also likes introducing less familiar varieties of produce that people might think can't be grown in Hawaii. "There's malabar spinach and Okinawan spinach, which do well here, whereas the most familiar variety is grown in cold weather," Butera said.

Butera herself got into the business during another stressful time, the 2008 recession. A graphic designer by training, she drew on her artistic skills and her lifelong love of gardening to start her business. "Concurrently Michelle Obama started her White House garden," she said, "so there was this realization that, 'Yes, you can do this in your yard.' "

For years, Asaiah Scott would look at the sidewalk-sized strip of yard behind his rented house in Kailua with indifference. It was overgrown with weeds and underbrush.

"It was just really sandy dirt and weeds and that big false koa (haole koa)," he said.

During the shutdown last year, however, he saw an opportunity. "We wanted to grow some kind of food on our own, be a little self-sufficient," said Scott, a reggae musician. "I had some sort of space and wasn't utilizing it, and I thought that was a little foolish."

The small plot is now mostly grass, but it has two small beds where he grows produce like Swiss chard and kale, and herbs like cilantro, basil, even sugar cane. It's plenty for him and his wife.

The garden was designed and installed in about a week by Chance Correa of Malama Aina Landscaping. He installs all-organic gardens using a method called Korean Natural Farming, which uses microorganisms to produce fertile soils and growing mediums without using pesticides. He has added "steam-weeding" to his repertoire, where he uses a large steam-generating machine — its original purpose was to degrease equipment and sanitize structures — to kill weeds and prepare land for planting.

"It's like a low-pressure, high-volume steam, heated up to 325 degrees," Correa said.

At those temperatures, existing weeds are killed and any seeds are sterilized, leaving behind fresh soil that readily accepts and nurtures new plants, Correa said. He got the machine just before the pandemic hit and plans to get another, hoping to start a trend around the islands in keeping gardens free of chemicals.

Scott's garden shows the benefits of starting with a clean slate. His banana tree, though planted just months ago as a waist-high sapling, now towers over the house and is bearing fruit in large bunches. He had a papaya tree that grew fruits so large they broke the tree.

"The steam-weeding really helped reset (the soil) and gave all the plants and the grass a chance to establish themselves," Scott said.

He's found that his garden requires minimal maintenance. Fruit from the fallen papaya tree have propagated and have started to sprout. The banana tree has started producing shoots of its own. Greens can be picked leaf by leaf without having to be replanted as often.

"It's pretty exciting stuff to watch it go from like a little laundry-hanging area, but so overgrown with weeds that it was like you really didn't want to go out there and do laundry," Scott said, "to reclaim a space, but as a bonus, now there's food that we can harvest and eat."

Correa's own garden, located on his Kailua property that has been in his family for five generations, is an edible orchard, with plants like a tree that grows 5-pound avocados; a soursop tree, which produces an edible, juicy fruit; ulu (breadfruit) trees that produce up to 900 pounds of ulu a year; and a wide variety of vegetables and herbs. He composts all the clippings and trimmings, which he uses on his garden as well as on his clients'. "We don't give to the green can," he said. "We keep it here because that stuff is gold."

Although Correa has been in the landscaping business for about 15 years, he considers his mentor to be food advocate Daniel Anthony of Hui Aloha Aina Momona, a nonprofit which teaches traditional farming methods to help people establish their own home gardens. During the pandemic, the organization distributed more than 20,000 kalo starter plants to the community.

Six years ago, Anthony acquired a 3-acre lot near Kahaluu, which at the time was unproductive and contaminated with chemicals. Since then, he's transformed the acreage into a fertile farm, using chemical-free fertilizers and soil additives, which are produced on-site with traditional methods. He's begun to sell the additives through his nonprofit Aloha Organic.

"We'd been talking about this for years, because we'd be like, 'Wow, look at how good this stuff works!' " Anthony said. "We put into practice these traditional applications to rejuvenate your soil. It took us six years to go from absolutely dead to, amazingly, growing our own food."

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WHAT IT COSTS

The cost to start an edible garden can vary greatly, depending on the size, what kind of garden you're planting and how much work you plan to do yourself.

Fran Butera

Foodscapes Hawaii

An initial site visit is $265; $90 an hour for monthly maintenance visits. Cost varies for garden and supplies.

Info: foodscapeshawaii.com

Chance Correa

Malama Aina Landscaping

Correa does not charge for an initial visit and basic planning. Asaiah Scott's garden cost about $2,000, which included clearing the land and installing a sprinkler system.

Info: 782-4794; hawaiilandscapedesign.com

Aloha Organic

Info: alohaorganic.org