

Gardens: The freshest produce, just outside your back door



By season's end, the garden comes alive with bursts of color from ripened fruits and vegetables, picked and enjoyed by family and friends.

Continued from C1

"If I ate everything," Francesco says, "I couldn't walk."

Every inch of the Baldinos' West Paterson yard is packed with plants, including a small patch of blackberries in front of the house — grown from seeds imported from Italy — and hot peppers that greet visitors as they approach the front door.

Neighbors spot Francesco tending to his garden at sunrise, before the midday heat sets in. He's planted a garden each of the 15 years he's lived in the modest one-bedroom home. But since his retirement, three years ago, from the DaMarco Container Company in Riverdale, he's had a surfeit of time to spend on it.

"It's good," Andriana says with a smile. "It keeps him out of my hair."

The gardening tradition is one Francesco learned from his parents in Benevento, Italy, where he grew up helping in the family gar-

den. Now his family helps him, especially during harvest time. He installed metal rods in between large branches of his apple tree — perfect climbing aids for the grandkids, who do most of the apple picking.

The Baldinos buy seedlings from area nurseries and plant them in early May. They rotate the plants' locations each year to keep the soil fresh and use a commercial fertilizer to nudge their plants along in the early summer months. By season's end, the garden comes alive with bursts of color from ripened fruits and vegetables, picked and enjoyed by family and friends.

After that, it's back to Francesco's wintertime hobby: playing cards.

Fourteen years ago, Betty Dunn introduced the idea of a garden to her partner, Jose Velez. She had



Photos by KEVIN R. WEXLER/Herald News

Francesco Baldino picks blackberries outside his West Paterson home, where he has planted a garden for 15 years. He grows a dazzling array of produce, including many items used in Italian cuisine, but not basil. "I could never get used to the smell," he explains in Italian.

tired of spending money on such everyday staples as tomatoes and peppers, easily grown in the backyard. Back then, however, they had no backyard, just a small fenced-in plot of front yard on Temple Street and North Sixth Street in Paterson.

"We still grew a lot of stuff there," Dunn says. "I lived there 11 years, so everybody knew me and they wouldn't mess with the garden."

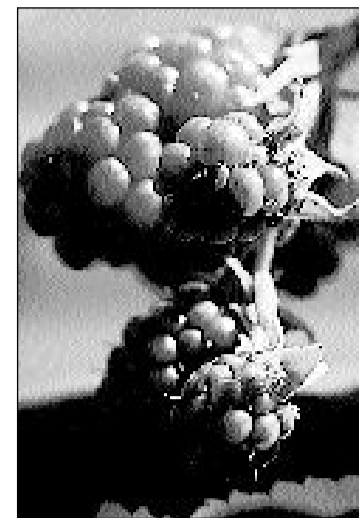
Three years ago, the couple moved to a building on Jasper Street, where they have a backyard garden twice the size of the original. Aside from Jersey tomatoes, bell peppers, broccoli, cucumbers, corn and cabbage, they also grow aloe vera, green pigeon peas, pinto beans, small peppers called *ajicitos*, sweet peppers or

ajis dulce, cubanelle peppers, a mint called *hierba buena*, and cilantro. And Dunn recently planted a small peach tree, which won't bear fruit for a few years. She even has a small sour orange tree, or *naranja agria*, even though the cold climate prevents it from giving fruit.

"I just saved the seed and planted it, and it started growing. The leaves are good for tea," she says, recounting how she recently brewed some to calm the upset tummy of a friend's baby.

A New Jersey native of Italian descent, Dunn lived for three years in Puerto Rico and speaks fluent Spanish. Jose lives most of the year in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, where he tends a garden in the large plot between his mother's and his sister's houses. He worked for Pioneer Industries in Carlstadt for 28 years, but retired when they went out of business.

"He wants me to move to Puerto Rico, but I don't want to move there," says Dunn. "Not yet anyway."



The differences in climate between Puerto Rico and New Jersey pose a few problems for the transplanted Caribbean gardener. Most plants that thrive in year-round warmth — citrus fruits, avocado, papaya, guava — die when exposed to a northern winter. Which does she miss the most?

"Mangos," she says. "I wish I could grow mangos."

Please see **GARDENS, C3**