
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 83

Essential Garden lessons

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/83

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown Podcast, episode number 83.

Speaker 2: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host National PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there everybody. Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast. I'm your host Theresa Loe and this podcast is about living farm fresh without the farm. We talk about things like preserving the harvest, small space food growing, and just simple ways to live a more sustainable lifestyle.

If you're interested in learning about any of these topics I have a ton more information on my website, livinghomegrown.com. Just head on over and get on my mailing list and you'll be in the loop whenever I have events, free webinars or master class trainings. How do you get on the mailing list? Just sign up for anything on the site. You can sign up for a free download from one of the podcast episodes or my canning resource guide, anything at all, and you will be on the list. Super easy. All right.

First of all, happy New Year, I hope you're all having a wonderful first few weeks of 2017. I took a short little break from podcasting and I hope you guys didn't mind but I just really needed to have some downtime to spend some time with the family and it was really awesome. I'm kicking off this new year with a podcast episode that's a little bit different.

Normally, I either do a solo episode where I give you an in-depth DIY training or I have an expert come on and I interview the expert. Today, I have a whole slew of experts on the show. All the experts today have been on the podcast at some time or another. They're all very well respected, nationally known experts and they have books and all different areas of expertise. They were all gracious enough to come back to answer one very special garden-related question and then share it with all of you.

In other words, they all are answering the same question but they all had really different and insightful answers. I asked them to think back to when they were just starting out gardening and how they felt and what they were worried about. I told them if you could go back in time knowing what you know now, what advice would you tell your younger self? What would you say to that newbie, beginner gardener?

Each of the gardening experts I asked offered up the advice that they would give their younger self and it's great because they each had really different answers. Some offered up some really specific gardening tips and techniques, things that we could apply to our gardens right now, and others offered up more like philosophical advice on gardening in general.

I hope you really enjoy this episode. I thought it would be a fun way to change it up for the very first episode of the new year. Now next week we're just returning to our normal format but after you listened to this episode I would love it if you would let me know if you enjoyed it or not. If you loved it, tell me. If you didn't like it, please tell me that too. If you like it I might do this again sometime with experts in maybe a different area like artisan food crafts and we'd see what kind of answers we get from them. If you don't like it, I won't do it anymore. I just thought this would be fun and I'd love to have your feedback on it.

What I'm going to do is introduce each garden expert before they give their answer and I'll mention their website but be sure to check out the show notes for this episode so you can get the full scoop on each person that I'm featuring here. As an extra bonus, I have put together a PDF just for you that has all the garden advice that's given in this episode plus a few extras that I threw in there.

You can get your hands on the free PDF just by going to livinghomegrown.com/83 and you can download it there and that's also where I'll have links to all the expert websites and the respective episodes that they've been on in the past if you're interested in learning more about them. Just remember you just go to livinghomegrown.com/83. Everything will be there for you. Okay? All right, so here we go.

First up, I have Joe Lamp'l. Now you probably know if you follow me at all that Joe and I work together. Joe is the host and the executive producer of the PBS television series Growing a Greener World and I'm the co-executive producer and the canning expert on the show. Now through Growing a Greener World we tell the stories of people who are making a difference in organic gardening. Joe, he's been on this podcast twice. He's been on in episode 15 where we talked about backyard beekeeping and on episode 68 where he dove deep into composting 101.

Aside from being a television personality and an author, Joe is also one of the nation's leading experts in organic sustainable gardening and you can learn more about Joe over at growingagreenerworld.com or at joegardener.com.

I thought I'd start with Joe's answer because we were chatting about this group podcast idea and he gave some really great overall garden advice. I

decided to use Joe's answers in two different spots in this episode. First, here's Joe's answer when I asked him what is the most important advice he would give to someone who wanted to grow organically with no chemicals, someone who's just starting out, what would they need to know.

Joe: I would say the first piece of advice I would give is put the right plant in the right place and it may seem obvious but I see this mistake made all the time. If you put a plant that wants to be in shade it's going to do a lot better if you give it that opportunity. If it's in sun and it's just not happy there it's never going to thrive. You're going to see that it's not thriving. Then if you don't know that you should have put that in the shade you're going to try to fix it with chemicals and that's only going to make the situation worse.

If you will take the time to understand the plant's preferred growing environment and put it there you're going to eliminate 90% of your problems in advance just by putting it where it wants to grow. It's predisposition to want to grow, just help it by putting it in the right place so it can thrive. The other thing is feed the soil and let the soil feed the plants. So often we try to fix a plant's problems because one, we didn't put it in the right place but even if we did and it has a few problems, we try to throw fertilizers at it. We try to throw pesticides at it. We try to throw herbicides at it.

The more people understand about the benefit and the value of soil and compost and organic matter in the soil and the more that we do to feed the soil so that Mother Nature can help that plant thrive naturally, it's just as though you and I try to persist on a junk food diet. We get hungry and we can go get something healthy and nutritious to tie this over until we eat a good healthy meal and then we're so much better because of it or we can satiate that hunger craving with potato chips or something really junky. Although we feel full for the moment, we get a sugar rush and then we hit up crash and then we eat something nasty for dinner.

Same thing with our plants, we want to put them on a good diet too. You know as well as I do how much better we feel when we're on a good regiment of taking care of our own selves, we should do the same thing for our plants and they're going to thrive. Those are my two words of wisdom, put the right plant in the right place and then feed the soil and let the soil feed the plant.

Theresa: I love that analogy of junk food for us versus junk food for our plants. I think that's so true because it's just like how our immune system gets taxed and sluggish if we junk and when our immune system is not up to snuff, you know what happens, right? We get sick. The same thing happens to plants. If a plant is not getting the nutrients it needs from the soil its immune system suffers and if that happens, it's compromised and it becomes more susceptible to all kinds of bug problems and looks, well, cruddy and sad.

Joe's advice of feeding the soil to feed the plants instead of trying to use chemicals to feed the plants directly is so, so good. It's just like how we do better when we eat real fruits and vegetables instead of eating junk and then thinking we can fix with a multivitamin, right? That never works. Feed the soil to feed the plants, that's great advice.

All right, next up is Rebecca Sweet. Rebecca is a gardener in the Bay Area of California and the owner of the garden design firm Harmony in the Garden. You can find Rebecca at harmonyinthegarden.com. Rebecca was on podcast episode 71 on how to refresh your garden design which happen to be one of the most popular episodes of 2016.

Now I love how she answered this one because she gave some really solid tips that build off what Joe just said. Take note here because what they're both telling you is so, so key if you want to step away from synthetics in the garden, so here's Rebecca's answer to what advice would you give your younger gardener self.

Rebecca: If I could go back in time knowing what I know now after gardening for over 30 years I'd give a few pieces of advice to my young gardening self. First of all, one of the most important things I would tell myself would be to focus on building up the soil whenever possible rather than spending a lot of money on a lot of different fertilizers.

I used to buy random fertilizers at the big-box stores that I thought would boost my garden but one year I just stopped mainly, because I hated this particular garden chore which coincided with my learning more and more about the importance of composting and using organic products in my garden whenever possible. Here's how I've learned to do it and it's worked really, really well.

First of all, in my garden I used a quarter-inch bark which is also known as mini mulch as a top dressing all around my planting beds. The bark not only looks really nice but it also helps to suppress weeds as well as helping the soil retain its moisture for as long as possible which is critical in my drought-stricken area. The mini mulch lasts only a year or two before it starts to break down and disintegrate back into the soil so it needs to be refreshed periodically.

However, before I add more bark, I first add a layer of compost throughout my garden. After I've done that then I add a top dressing of mulch. I like to do this in the late fall so I can take advantage of the winter rain that will help distribute the nutrients from the compost down to the plants' roots. I wish I could say I make my own compost at home but I just don't have the room in my suburban garden so instead I purchase a yard of it from my local garden

center and have it delivered, dumped in my driveway along with a yard or two of mini mulch.

It's a backbreaking chore to be sure but you can always make it easier by focusing on one small area at a time using smaller amounts of compost and mulch that you can usually buy bagged at garden centers. Once you've done this for a few years I promise you will have a garden that thrives beautifully without you constantly having to feed it. Your plants will be stronger, happier and healthier and will thank you for it for years to come.

Another thing I'd tell my young gardening self is to keep the tags of your plants handy somewhere, whether it's a binder or something as simple as punching a hole in the tags and putting them on a big key ring. Also make sure to write down where you planted that particular plant in your garden. I have some very early plant tags for when I was first gardening with the plant location scribbled directly on them with a Sharpie pen and I'm so glad I did that. It's simple, it's fast and as you garden throughout the years you'd be amazed at how your garden changes over time as well as how your memory fades, and it's so nice to have a record of what you planted and where.

Finally I would tell myself to plant trees now rather than wait later. As new gardeners we tend to focus on the beauty of the flower, right? We walk into a nursery and we're mesmerized by all the colorful bounty laid out before us and what do we do? We walk out with armloads of perennials and annuals. Because trees are so permanent and so slow to establish, decide on where and what you'd like and get them in the ground now. Trust me, time flies by and you may not notice that little spindly tree for a few years as you're busy with other parts of your garden but one day, you'll look up and be so happy that it's now casting shade or offering you colorful full foliage or bursting with spring flowers.

Among other things, trees add such a sense of permanence to the garden so focus on them first, get them in the ground and then have fun with your flowers.

Theresa: Awesome, right? That is actually something that I wish I had done in our front yard. I never planted a tree out there and we are just doing it now but man, it sure would have been nice to have a tree planted out there 25 years ago when we first bought the property. We do have 25-year-old fruit trees along the perimeter of our backyard and I am so grateful that I have them now.

We get a ton of fruit from those trees, which is pretty cool, but what I wouldn't give to have a beautiful tree in the front yard that's the same age but oh well, we're doing it now and it's just going to have to do.

As we leave Rebecca talking about planting trees and then moving on to flowers we go in to Susan Morrison's answer which is also about flowers but in a much different way. You might remember Susan from episode 55 on designing a food garden for double duty. Susan is a landscape designer and a nationally recognized authority on smaller sized outdoor spaces. She lives and works in the Bay Area of California also and is actually very close to where Rebecca lives.

You can find information on Susan Morrison at celandscapedesign.com. Now here's Susan's answer to our universal question.

Susan: My name is Susan Morrison and I am a garden writer and designer with Creative Exteriors Landscape Design in Northern California. If I could go back in time and offer some advice to my newbie gardener self it would be to ask more experienced gardener about the difference between annuals and perennials and shrubs before I spent a fortune at the garden center.

When I was first married my husband and I bought a new house that had no landscaping so after laying out space for flower borders I went to the nursery in the spring and I bought a bunch of six packs and one gallon sizes of ranunculus and foxglove and other plants that I can't actually remember anymore what they were but I created this really beautiful border.

I was so excited to show it off to my mom the next weekend after I had finished planting it and she was very complimentary and kindly did not point out to me that my entire border would be done blooming and essentially dead three weeks later. Conversely, in another part of the garden I did actually plant perennials specifically lantana Irene thinking that it would only grow a little bit bigger than its four-inch pot. By the end of the summer I had to pull it out as well because it had completely outgrown the space.

Really, the worst part of all of this is that my mother was an experienced gardener and if I had consulted with her first instead of racing off on my own so that I could impress her with my great sense of garden style she would have given me a basic understanding of how plants worked and saved me a lot of time and grief and money.

Theresa: Oh my gosh, I am so glad that Susan brought this one out because I did the same thing. When I was in college I went to a nursery to buy flowers for my rental and I used all my extra food money and I was so excited because the nursery had a ton of flowers on sale. I loaded up my car and I spent all afternoon planting and they were dead in two weeks when the weather turned cold, why? Because they were all heat-loving annuals and that was why they were on sale.

I was so upset but lesson learned. From that point on, I always researched what was in season before I went to the garden center. Susan is so right, just ask. It's totally okay to ask for advice and it just might save you a ton of expensive mistakes.

All right, next up is Robin Hagland of gardenmentors.com. She was on episode 21 which was all about how to attract pollinators into our food garden. Now Robin lives in the state of Washington and part of what Robin's business is, is garden coaching where she spends a lot of time teaching and coaching brand new gardeners. Thinking about advice to share with a newbie gardener comes pretty easy to her because she does this every single day.

One area that new gardeners tend to need a little bit of training on is caring for established trees and large shrubs. This is more of a tip for people who are new to gardening but are starting out with a garden that is already established, meaning you don't have too much gardening under your belt and yet you have a garden with larger trees or established shrubs. This is one time when you don't want to dive in with [abandon 00:19:17] and Robin has some great advice on that. Here's what she had to say.

Robin: Hi, I'm Robin Hagland of Garden Mentors in gardenmentors.com and I have a lot of experience working with new gardeners. I have a hard time thinking back to my very first gardening experience because I've been out there since I could crawl. I do go in in my day-to-day work with Garden Mentors and work with aspiring gardeners, gardeners of all levels. In particular, I work a lot with people who are interested in achieving their own DIY experience.

One of the biggest mistakes I see folks do is trying things without really knowing what they're doing. Don't get me wrong, I am all for giving it your best shot on your own but what you can do when you get out on a garden and try things without any understanding of what you're doing is make some big irreparable mistakes or mistakes that are really costly.

One of the biggest ones I see is people going out with loppers or saws or hand pruners and just chopping away on plants. If you mis-prune you may completely destroy a very valuable plant or you may prune it in such a way that it takes literally years to repair that plant and I hate to see that happen. One of the things I tell people who are thinking about hiring me to come in and teach them to garden is don't clean up your garden before I get there. Don't try to make it look like you know what you're doing and you've been trying to take care of it. Go ahead and leave it messy.

Think of it as hiring a house cleaner. You want to let them see what you're really like so they can really evaluate what you need and give you the best shot and that would be my tip. Give everything a good shot, go ahead and

achieve some DIY goals but if you aren't sure what you're doing, get some help before you go out there, don't just go out and chop away on your plants.

I've done it. Honestly, I've made some mistakes on my own in the past that way and if I could go back in time and teach myself one thing not to do in that past life it would be don't just randomly chop away. Make sure you know what you're doing before you chop, chop, chop.

Theresa: Good advice. Now I don't want you think that what Robin is saying is contradictory. She loves it when people try new things and dive in to starting to grow new things and you'll hear that some of the next tips from our other experts speak directly to that. When you have an established tree or a large shrub, especially if it's an expensive plant, there's kind of a different level of care involved. That's when you're shifting from just starting out in gardening into the world of pruning for shape, form and function and that can be a little tricky.

There's a little bit of a science to that so by all means dive into gardening but if you need to cut back a fruit tree or a large established shrub, do a little research first and get some help before tackling that type of project. I think that's a great tip.

All righty, I brought Joy Lamp'l back, his clip back for the next segment here because he has this great piece of advice on gardening that seem to just fit perfectly here.

Joe swings the pendulum the other way from what Robin talks about and talks directly to the beginning of your gardening journey. He talks about when you're just learning to grow and even propagate plants which is completely different from the skill of pruning. I just wanted to point that out so you didn't think he was saying the opposite of Robin, he's not. They're talking about the opposite ends of the gardening spectrum.

Robin was talking about large established trees and what I'm going to share with Joe's clip is about starting plants and propagating plants when you are taking cutting and making more. Listen carefully, here's Joe.

Joe: Now that I've gardened for a decade or two or three and we'll just stop there, what I know now that I didn't know then that I learned quickly was that plants really are pretty easy to grow. I mean they've got this DNA in them that all they want to really do is reproduce and produce seed and flower, and we don't have to overcomplicate that.

I used to propagate a lot of plants when I was young just because I was experimenting. I didn't know if what I was about to do was going to result in a plant that took root or sprouted a new plant or whatever. The beauty of what

I did then was I tried it and I did it, and I didn't really know what I was doing. I certainly didn't have the internet or anything like that to do it but the fact is I did it. I didn't just sit there and wonder and not do it.

I did confirm what I know now through many years is that plants are easier to grow than I think we give them credit for and if we would just do it rather than think that we can't do it, we'd be a lot happier and we would learn a lot more in the process.

Theresa: That is so, so true and it's something that so many of the garden experts agree on. Gardening can be super sciencey and techie if you want to go there but gardening can also be such a very simple thing and if you want to get sciencey and techie, you don't have to. You can just try it and you'll be surprised what you can do without even really understanding why things are doing and growing the way they are and that's totally okay. All right. Next up is Sue Goetz.

Now Sue was on episode 66 where she came on the podcast to talk about using your garden to create simple spa treatments to nurture yourself. She is a garden designer, a writer and a speaker, and she lives in Seattle, Washington, and her website is the creativegardener.com. Just a reminder I will have more information on each one of these experts including their websites in the show notes so don't worry about writing any of them down and the show notes are at livinghomegrown.com/83.

Okay, so here's what Sue had to say when I asked her what is the best piece of advice you would give your younger gardener self.

Sue: I think trust the process. I used to be when I was first starting out, when I would plant seeds, I always was worried. Are these going to really grow? Am I going to really have corn out of this little tiny nothing? Now, it's like yes, of course. Sometimes not all the seeds germinate but you do what you're supposed to do and it is that simple.

I think as a new gardener I used to get a little worried about that and now I'm like no, just plant away, it happens. I mean nature does the job we expect it to do as long as you give it what it needs.

I think one of the best advices that I got was not to overcomplicate or overthink a garden too much. Nature is quite forgiving but she can also be kind of brutal and so if you try to control that you get in trouble. It's like working with nature and letting it work both ways. I think that's one of the best advices because we have so many things we look at on the shelf in a hardware store and go should I be spraying all this and yet it's just work with nature and not over complicate it.

Theresa: Absolutely. Working with nature and not against it is key. That will keep you organic. That will teach you about patience and about not trying to make your garden perfect. An organic garden is not meant to be perfect. It's not about perfection. It's about beauty, flavor and the journey of you as a gardener.

Okay, the next expert tip is from Stefani Bittner. Now she was on episode 75 where she talked about creating an epic edible garden design. She's one of the owners of Homestead Design Collective, a San Francisco Bay Area landscape design firm. Her website is homesteaddesigncollective.com. Here's what she had to say when speaking to her younger gardener self but in relation to garden design.

Stefani: What I know now that I wish I knew then was it's okay to experiment in your garden. When you garden with live plants, it's really fun to see what these plants can do. They don't need to look perfect. It is okay to have your gardening be a little bit wild. It's just giving the garden enough structure to allow it to be wild.

Theresa: I love that. It's about letting go a little bit, right? We all need to do that and letting go of perfection is the theme of the next garden expert too. Now Dee Nash was on episode number 69 and that one was on container food growing. She's an author and a blogger over at reddirtrablings.com and here's her answer to our universal question.

Dee: I would tell my younger gardener self that things don't have to be so perfect. I would also tell her to be sure and have your kids in the garden and don't worry so much about whether they tear stuff up. I just was such a broke poor little gardener when my children were small that I worried about everything and I was also kind of a perfectionist but now, that I'm an old gardener, now that I'm an older gardener, more experienced gardener, I have figured out that mistakes happen and it was more important for them to be able to get their hands in the dirt than it was for me to have the perfect tomato.

I did pretty well but I think I could have done better and so I tell my kids all the time it's okay to make mistakes, it's okay to mess things up, just don't try to be such a perfectionist. It's okay, really.

Theresa: It is okay. I totally agree especially when we bring kids into the garden. I am a big proponent of sharing the garden experience with our kids but you have to let go of perfection a little bit or you will stress yourself out. I agree with that 100%.

All right, that brings us to our very last garden expert for the group interview. Now this one is Stephanie Rose of gardentherapy.com

Now Stephanie you might remember was on episode 63 which was on homemade body care products that you can make from the garden and I saved Stephanie's answer for last because she too talks about letting go of perfection but in a really different way. I really love her answer here so let me just share with you what Stephanie would tell her younger gardener self.

Stephanie: I would tell my younger self to celebrate the failures. Every time a plant dies or doesn't work in a spot that you've learned something and not to worry so much about trying to make that work or figure out what you did wrong, instead just pull it up, put it in the compost and try to find something that does work. Spend your time on those things, celebrate the successes and celebrate the failures for what they taught you.

The thing that I learned when I started gardening was that you can very quickly want a garden to look magazine perfect in a very short period of time and because I started from nothing, it took a really long time to learn the skills. There were a lot of things that died, a lot of things that didn't do well and I found that to be a great learning experience. I actually learned a lot more from everything that grew well.

But my biggest piece of advice when somebody is learning to garden is to remember that the garden is there for you. You're not there for the garden. The garden shouldn't be a chore. It shouldn't be something that you have to go out and make look perfect everyday but if it's a place that you can go outside, enjoy, get some fresh air, dig in the soil a little bit and it makes your day a little bit better, who cares if it looks perfect? It's there for you to give you enjoyment and I think that for me is the biggest value that you can get from the space.

Theresa: Isn't that great? We have to remember to enjoy our gardens and that our gardens are there for us whenever we need them. I sure hope you enjoyed this special episode of Living Homegrown podcast. Don't forget that I created a very special PDF download that has many of the tips shared here plus a few others I've collected for you and the PDF download and the links to every single guest website and the respective episodes will be featured in the show notes for this episode.

You can get all of that at livinghomegrown.com/83. Thanks so much for listening. I'd love your feedback on this one and until next time just try to live a little but more local, seasonal and homegrown. Take care.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.