
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 124 Powerful Tips for Raised Bed Gardening

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/124

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown Podcast episode 124.

Announcer: 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 podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe, and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm, which includes preserving, small space food growing, and just taking small steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. Now, if you would like to learn more about any of these topics or my online courses or my Living Homegrown membership, just visit LivingHomegrown.com.

Today's topic is all about raised bed gardening. Now, if you live in an area where maybe your soil's not so great but you want to have a garden or maybe you don't have any space at all, you don't have any dirt, maybe you only have cement in your backyard and you'd like to garden or you want to have more accessibility to what you grow, any of those reasons, this is the episode for you. I brought on Tara Nolan who has recently written a book, *Raised Bed Revolution: Build It, Fill It, Plant It and Garden Anywhere!*

Now, Tara is one of the garden bloggers at Savvygardening.com. And I've had some of the other bloggers from that website here as well. These ladies always know their stuff so I was super excited to meet Tara and bring her on when this book came out because this is a really important topic, especially if you have a backyard that just doesn't lend itself to letting you garden directly into the soil. But I will let Tara tell you all the reasons that you might want to do raised bed gardening. She goes deep into that in this podcast.

But before I do that, let me tell you a little bit about Tara. Tara Nolan is a garden writer, author, editor, and speaker. Her work has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *Best Health Magazine*, and numerous other magazines. Her first book, *Raised Bed Revolution*, was published by Cool Springs Press in 2016. In 2013, she co-founded the popular gardening website *Savvy Gardening*, Savvygardening.com, with three other writers and it has won gold for best

overall digital media at the Garden Writer's Association Media Awards in 2017.

Tara was also the award-winning web editor of Canadian Gardening Magazine's website for six years and she's the social media editor of the Canadian Garden Council and when she has any extra time, she volunteers at the Royal Botanical Garden. So I wanted to bring her on really first of all to tell you all of the benefits of raised bed gardening and the things that you have to consider to do it. But I also wanted you to realize from listening to her talk that you don't have to be a whiz with power tools to have raised beds. I don't want people to think, "Oh, I'd love to do that, but I don't have a degree in construction so I can't build a raised bed." There are some really simple solutions that I'm going to have her go into so that you can have a raised bed without having to even break out a power tool if you don't want to.

Now as always, I will have in the show notes for this episode everything that Tara talks about including links that she mentions on some of the resources that she talks about. And to get to the show notes, you just go to Livinghomegrown.com/124 and I will also have a full transcript of the episode there. All right, so with that, let me bring on Tara Nolan of Savvy Gardening to talk about raised beds.

Hey Tara, thanks so much for coming on the show today.

Tara: Thanks for having me.

Theresa: Yeah. I'm excited about this one. This is something I haven't covered on the podcast before. But I loved your book, *Raised Bed Revolution*. I thought it was really well done. You were very thorough and there's so many things that I think hold people back from diving in with raised beds. So I love that we're going to cover this today. But before we start, could you just tell everybody a little bit about what you do in the gardening world and how you became interested in raised bed gardening specifically.

Tara: Absolutely. Well, I do a lot of garden writing. I'm in the garden media world, and I run a website called Savvy Gardening with three other garden writers and two of us happened to be in Canada and two are in the United States. So it's really interesting because we come from very different gardening zones and we're all coming together and talking about what we do in the garden and we have different niches as well. So it's really fun to put together this gardening website. And I write about gardening for different magazines and newspapers here in Canada, and I'm active in our local botanical garden.

So I do lots of gardening stuff and of course, I have my own raised beds and I've entered this publishing world with the book. So it's been really, really fun to get to know people that are also building their raised beds and have questions for me and see that they're responding to everything that's in the book that they

read. So it's really fun to see what others are building or creating as well.

Theresa: Yeah. We're going to dive into some of the unusual things later in our talk today because you had some really great ideas that I had never seen before. It's very, very clever so we'll talk about that. I just thought this was just a really thorough way that you covered this, and was there a specific reason that made you want to decide to dive in to being an author on this particular topic?

Tara: Well, when I moved into this current home that I'm in and I decided to build raised beds more from an aesthetic standpoint and elevate my garden to make it a really attractive space in my yard. I thought with the book opportunity, it was great because it marries two of my passions, one which is gardening and the other is DIY. I love doing crafty things. And so I was already gardening in raised beds but I wanted more, and so just that opportunity to create something from a flea market find. I love that idea of being able to delve in more. And then also researching a lot of the benefits of raised beds because as I mentioned, I started it just to make it a prettier space in my garden but then I discovered there's this whole host of benefits to raised bed gardening as well.

Theresa: I was going to say we should dive in absolutely into the benefits. I think that's probably where we should start because you had a couple benefits in there that I hadn't really considered. So let's start off with that. What are some of the benefits of raised bed gardening?

Tara: So I think one of the big ones that I discover with a lot of people is that idea of overcoming bad soil or hard-packed or clay soil. So it's sometimes for some people, it's actually preventing them from gardening because they might not get the best results with their vegetables. So a raised bed is fantastic because they can build it over top of that poor spot. They can build it a little bit higher and they can control all of the rich organic matter that goes inside.

Theresa: Yeah. That's a really good point and probably, the number one reason I would recommend someone do it at least before I read your book and I was thinking that is probably the number one reason that I would send someone down that path is if they just don't have the right soil because it can take a long time to build up your soil to be awesome.

Tara: Exactly.

Theresa: And you can do this in the meantime or you may just decide that raised beds are the way to go because there's so many other benefits. I know one of the things you talked about was just the aesthetics of raised beds. They can be quite beautiful.

Tara: They can and you see all these Pinterest-worthy images out there, even with people that have taken their front yard because perhaps that's where the light

is. They might have a big tree in the backyard and their space is in the front that's available for the heat-seeking vegetables. So you see some really lovely photos of people who have done a great job of actually landscaping with their raised beds.

Theresa: Yes, fantastic. Well, what are some of the other benefits?

Tara: Accessibility is a big one. For people that have trouble bending over or kneeling in the garden, raised beds raised the garden up to wherever you need it to be. So it could come up to waist height if you really wanted it to or just a few inches or feet up, then it allows you to get into that bed easier and dig around and garden and plant.

Theresa: Yeah. And you mentioned the front yard and really just even not having a spot at all, this can give you a place to garden.

Tara: Exactly. I like to emphasize that people can put a raised bed virtually anywhere, provided you have that six to eight hours of sunshine that I recommend for the vegetables to thrive in your garden. And also, as far as having bad soil, you might even just have a deck or a patio or flagstone or something so you can put a raised bed over that as well.

Theresa: That's a really good point. So when we're talking about raised beds, really we should be thinking outside the box, not just the standard square or rectangle boxes but it could go not just in the garden but on the patio. It could go even on cement, I suppose, if you really just don't have a spot at all.

Tara: Exactly. I've seen some on driveways as well. They've made use of that warm area and they've created a whole raised bed garden just from putting it over top of the concrete.

Theresa: Okay, very good. So limited space is definitely one of the benefits. What are some of the others?

Tara: I would say another big one is that you can increase your yield. When I was researching the book, there was a fact sheet that I found. It was from Ohio State University and they studied a raised bed over a few years and found that it produced almost twice the yield of vegetables that were grown in the traditional plots of veggie garden.

Theresa: Yeah. That one really surprised me when I saw that. I was like-

Tara: Yeah. I found that one really interesting.

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah. So explain why. What are the reasons behind that?

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- Tara: It's funny because when I talk about that in my garden talks, I get a lot of questions about that. And I think one of the main ones is that the soil warms up sooner in the spring so you can get your edibles in. They have a bit of a head start, perhaps, over a traditional vegetable garden. You're also not walking between rows so the soil is nice and friable. It's not compacted. You don't have that walking space that you would in a traditional vegetable garden. So you're actually adding more vegetables into perhaps the same amount of space because you're just reaching in from the sides.
- Theresa: Yeah. Well, the warming of the soil has got to be key because it gives you much more of a jumpstart than you would normally have, so you end up getting a longer growing season essentially.
- Tara: Exactly. And certainly here in Southern Ontario where I live, it's really great to be able to maximize that time because sometimes spring starts a little bit later than you'd hoped. You keep getting those frosts and it's nice to be able to get things into the right spot and then you could get into the accessories you can use to protect your crops, so row cover and things like that.
- Theresa: Yeah. I wasn't even planning on talking about that but you do go into that in the book about how we can winterize our raised beds. I find that it just seems a lot easier to winterize a raised bed than it is in the soil. It's so easy to build some sort of a structure or hoop over the raised bed. You do cover that, so I guess that's also why you get a longer yield is that it's so easy to make it go longer.
- Tara: Exactly. I can extend my season sometimes well into November, early December, depending on Mother Nature. So it's really nice to be able to keep things in the ground as long as possible.
- Theresa: Yeah, very good. Okay. Well, what about controlling weeds? I always think of that as being one of the benefits of raised beds. It seems like at least initially because you're starting with fresh soil, you don't have the weeds that you might have in the soil in the ground.
- Tara: It's true. It's nice starting from scratch for sure. There's one side of my house where I want to add some raised beds and there's bindweed in there, which is just the bane of my gardening existence. But it's nice to be able to start fresh and add soil that hopefully hasn't been contaminated with any weed seeds in there and then you can use things like mulch to prevent the weeds from growing up. So right now, I planted my garlic in the fall and I've got a nice cozy bed of mulch over top.
- Theresa: Well, I know one thing for me with, it seems, just a little bit easier for me with raised beds to do my crop rotations and I'm not really sure why. I guess it's just easier to keep track of where I'm going and where I came from with like I'm moving my peas around or my tomatoes around the garden. I know you

mentioned that too as one of the benefits in the book.

Tara: Absolutely, because one thing we know with monoculture is it's not a good thing to plant the same thing in the same space every year. So to a certain extent, you can use that in a smaller space and rotate crops around which I do with all of my raised beds. And also, I found I get the Colorado potato beetle, for example, that likes my tomatillos and so they overwinter in the soil, unfortunately. So the one year, I had a ground cherry that I brought home early in the season from a plant sale and the Colorado potato beetles had evidently come back, and I went out and there were already holes in my plant. I hadn't even put it in the garden yet. So it's nice to be able to rotate those things, those different crops around also for pest control.

Theresa: Very good. Yeah. In case anyone doesn't know about the benefits of crop rotation, it's really also because your plant will draw certain nutrients from the soil as it's growing. And if you grow tomatoes, for example, in the same place over and over and over, the soil will be depleted of exactly what that tomato needs. And when you rotate, you can keep everything more in balance and it's the best way to go as farmers do that. But here in our little backyard plots, we might not think of that but it really is an important thing to do, so very good. Yeah, it makes it a little bit easier to keep track of what was in box A and what was in box B.

Tara: I have a little chart. I have a garden diary, so I try to keep track of everything and make notes, yeah.

Theresa: Yeah, very good. Okay. I think that's really a lot of benefits. People can really see what the benefits of raised bed gardening is. So let's dive in a little bit into exactly what they need to consider if they want to do this in their backyard or their front yard or even their patio or balcony or anything like that. So what are some of the considerations that we need to keep in mind?

Tara: So definitely the location, you want to make sure that your space gets about six to eight hours of sunshine a day. And you can just even do a little bit of a test and just go at certain points during the day and see where the sun hits at various times. And it's nice just to do a little bit of a test like that if you're new to the space and you don't necessarily see where the shade comes in during the afternoon.

My two original raised beds are actually ... I live on a ravine and so where they were placed, I have a bit more dappled shade than I used to when I moved in several years ago because the trees have gotten ... The tree canopy has gotten bigger. So now, I have to think okay, maybe I'm not going to put my tomatoes in that space because it's not quite as warm as the space on the west side of my property. I take that still into consideration with some of the raised beds that I have because my environment changes a little bit every year.

- Theresa: Yeah. That's a really good point also. A lot of times, people will be planning their garden for spring while they're sitting inside during the winter. And the thing they have to keep in mind is that the trees might be very different in the winter than they will be in the summer if they're deciduous. So I know so many gardeners, beginning gardeners especially, who have done this. But even intermediate gardeners do it where you go out and you're like, "Oh, I'm ready to plan my garden." And you start planning it and then the tree canopy fills up in the spring when the leaves come back and all of a sudden, you actually are planting in the shade. So definitely something to think about. You want to look at the hours during the growing season so that you know exactly how many hours of sunlight you have. But, yeah. So okay, location definitely. What are some of the other considerations?
- Tara: Well, you'll want to figure out what size you want it to be and really, I like to emphasize that raised beds can be as big or as small as you need them to be for your space. If we're talking about those standard big rectangular raised beds, I should say about three to four feet wide by six to eight feet long and then ten to twelve inches high.
- Theresa: Okay, perfect. And so is there a minimum depth that you would recommend, like what would you not consider a raised bed anymore if it's just too shallow?
- Tara: It really depends on the soil underneath. So if you are planting your raised bed over a hard-packed or clay soil, that's just not workable. You want to keep in mind that when you're planting your root vegetables, you don't want them reaching down and hitting a wall, essentially. So you might want to raise your bed up a little bit higher. I mean if you're planting over a really lovely, friable soil, then you can probably go a few inches lower than the recommend height because once those veggies are reaching into the subsoil, then they're still going to thrive with the soil underneath that's good.
- Theresa: Okay. Now what about the space between the beds because I know this was a mistake I made on my first set of raised beds, I made them a little too close together.
- Tara: Well, you want to be able to comfortably kneel down or bend over between the raised beds but also, if you're replenishing soil or you're going back and forth from a compost pile or bringing in bags of soil on the spring, you want to maybe be able to take your wheelbarrow through. So maybe just measure what you're going to be wheeling through that space and place them accordingly.
- Theresa: Yeah. That was the mistake I made. It was on my very, very first garden that I ever had raised beds and I wanted to fit as many as I could and I made them really tight together and it was kneeling down part that really did not work out.

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- Tara: Yeah, and you're sort of balancing.
- Theresa: Yeah, because-
- Tara: You know.
- Theresa: Yeah, exactly, because you really want to get down on your knees and have your knee, it fits up against that board, up against the wall. You don't want your foot to be in the next bed or up against the wall. So I had them so close together. I had two gardens sideways because I couldn't go straight at my garden. It was terrible and yes, it was not close enough for a wheelbarrow. So I learned on that one and I never made that mistake again. So I was glad you had that in the book. That was really good, yeah.
- Tara: It's an easy one to me.
- Theresa: Yeah, absolutely. Well, you get overly excited and you want to fit as much as you can in there so definitely mapping it out on paper but thinking about that space, how you're really going to be using it is important. So what about building materials? What can we make these raised beds out of?
- Tara: So for all of mine, I've used untreated cedar. So I think untreated, rot-resistant wood. You might want to do a little bit of research about what's available near you. My counterpart, Niki Jabbour, who's on the East Coast, she has hemlock more readily available so that's what her raised beds are made out of. So just take a look at your local lumber yard or big-box store, wherever you're shopping for wood and perhaps ask someone just to make sure that it's rot resistant and do a little bit of research and choose accordingly.
- Theresa: Very good, yeah. And I know you talk about it in your book but you have to be really careful with recycled wood because I know if we're food gardeners, I want to avoid pressure-treated wood because it's treated with chemicals that I probably don't want in my garden. Or it could be, if it's older wood, could be very dangerous chemicals. So what do you recommend about recycled wood?
- Tara: Well, I am all about upcycling. I have some upcycling projects in my book. But I do recommend to people that they make sure that if they're taking old boards from a deck or a fence that might have been pressure treated or treated in some way, that they maybe not use those for food gardening. Or unless they know the exact place where they're from and what they're made of, maybe use them for another project but certainly not for a vegetable garden.
- Theresa: Okay. Very good. And we are going to talk about the different ways that you can make it without having to use power tools or have a raised bed without power tools. But I know one thing that you talk about in the book are those little corners that we can buy where we just cut the wood and drop it in. So there's

some very easy ways to put this together without having to have a team of construction workers with you.

- Tara: Exactly. And corners were a great discovery. I found some really fun ones through gardener supply company. And then here in Southern Ontario, we've got Lee Valley Tools and they have corners as well. So you do a little research and you can find these great contraptions that really, you just have to have the width size and maybe a screwdriver to affix them to the wood.
- Theresa: Yeah, and I've actually used these. They are really simple. I mean you can put it together really quickly if you get all the wood cut to the sizes that you need. It's like putting together Lego. It goes really fast.
- Tara: Yeah, and it's so easy. You can have a raised bed in an hour probably.
- Theresa: Yeah, exactly. It doesn't have to be scary. I don't want anyone to be intimidated that they have to be a construction worker to put this together. There are some really simple ways that you can do this, and we're going to go into that more. But I first want to talk about probably the most important component to your raised beds and that's soil. I think sometimes people get hung up on that part because they're like, "Oh, my gosh. If I build this, then I have to fill it up with soil and it's going to cost me a fortune."
- Tara: Yes, and I had a lot of raised beds to fill especially with the books. So I had a few projects that required a lot of soil. So I did a little bit of calling around and I ended up getting them at a soil depot nearby, and I spoke at length with the girl on the phone just asking questions. I'm probably annoying her but I just wanted to make sure I was getting the best quality soil.
- My recommendation is always just the best quality soil that you can afford because it can get very pricey. And with the 4x8 raised bed, you don't want to be hauling bags from a garden center. That may add up very quickly. So I try to buy my soil in bulk. And then what I did was I top dressed all of it with compost. So the first top few inches of soil, I just add in a nice layer of organic vegetable compost and then I was good to go.
- Theresa: Yes, very good. Yeah, and we're going to want to do that anyway. You even have a section on composting. So if someone wants to learn more about how to do that, but definitely having compost mixed in there is fantastic. And I did the same thing, I ordered my soils. It was all dumped in by a truck. The truck came in and dumped it, then we just wheel barreled it over to the raised beds, and it wasn't that hard to do. In fact, a lot of places when you call, you don't even have to do the calculations. I'll have in the show notes how you do the calculations but you really don't even have to do that, they will do it for you. They'll just say what are your measurements and they'll figure out how much soil you need. So it really is not too hard to get your raised beds filled.

Tara: Exactly.

Theresa: Well, I'm so excited to talk about this next section which is some of the more unusual ways that we can make a raised bed out of more unusual ingredients, I guess, than just the typical lumber. You had a lot of step by step instructions in the book for different things. But you were really creative, and one that I really loved was that you made a raised lettuce table out of an old table. So you took the top off the table and turned that into a raised bed for lettuce, which I thought was so great because then the snails can't get to it. So tell us about some of the unusual things that we can use for containers for making raised beds.

Tara: Well, I think the table is probably the most popular one that was in the book. Certainly, a lot of people like to talk about that one. But I also discovered the magic of fabric raised bed. So you can get these great raised beds that are square or round shaped. I discovered them a few years ago in Quebec City when we are on the Garden Raiders tour and they were all over the city, and they were using them to landscape. And also, they're a lot lighter. So if you're concerned about weight on a balcony or a deck, then fabric is a nice raised bed option.

And then apparently, they're really good because of the porous material. They allow a process called air pruning. So apparently, it's really good for the roots of your plants. So I plant potatoes in mine every year. You could plant spreaders, so you're not going to have a huge raised bed full of mint but you definitely don't want it in your actual garden. So you could have a nice small raised bed of mint.

Galvanized tubs, so they use a lot of these at botanical gardens and community gardens. They call them stock tanks, if you're looking for them perhaps through a farmer's hardware store. And you can use these nice big horse troughs essentially that I use to hydrate livestock as a garden. And I even have a tip about if you don't want to fill the entire thing with soil, there's some tricks you can use to just fill them up halfway.

Theresa: Yeah. I saw that in there. I really love those galvanized tubs. I love the look. It's kind of industrial, urban. It looks really, really cool. But yeah, you can fill up the bottom with other things so that it's not an entire four feet tall. I guess it's not even that big but it's like two and a half or three feet tall. It doesn't have to be solid soil unless you're growing trees, I guess, if you could use it for that. But good point about the invasives though. I'm glad you brought that up because yes, if you're growing something like mint. There was another one that you mentioned. What was it, chamomile?

Tara: Chamomile.

Theresa: Yeah, that is a good thing to put in some sort of a container so that it doesn't get all over the place.

Tara: Things that like to come back.

Theresa: Yeah. Maybe not where you want them to come back to.

Tara: Exactly.

Theresa: You even had trash cans. You used trash cans for some of your raised beds, which I thought was really great.

Tara: Old recycling bins. They use that at one of the local botanical gardens here. The kids can take the potatoes out of the recycling bins at the end of the season, and they see where their food came from. So it's a great lesson as well to be able to upcycle and then also to be able to show them where their food comes from. And then I had a great kit where everything that comes in this particular kit was sent to my door, and all I needed to do is borrow a socket wrench from my dad and just make sure all the bolts were tightened. And that was all I needed for that raised bed which was really nice because if you don't have the tools either, it's nice to be able to still be able to put something together.

Theresa: So it came as a kit. It had your wood already precut?

Tara: Yes. Everything I needed was precut, pre-drilled. There are little bags with all the nuts and bolts that I needed, very thorough instructions. And then it even came with recipe cards where you could plant a salsa garden, and just ideas for what types of things that you could put in this particular raised bed.

Theresa: That's really good. I know you even had some in there that had like wheels so you could move things around. I mean really, anyone can build a raised bed to be any size, shape, color and it can be mobile or not mobile and it can be at any height.

Tara: Absolutely. And the casters was a great one because a couple of the projects I built are rather heavy. So to be able to just wheel those into the shed or the garage at the end of the season is really nice instead of having to lift them out.

Theresa: Yeah.

Tara: They're rather heavy.

Theresa: Yeah, that's absolutely true. Well, one thing we haven't talked about yet and that is the watering aspect. And I know you recommend that if we can to use dripper systems.

Tara: Yes, and that's one thing that is missing from my yard as my poor parents can attest because they had to come and water everything when I was away this past summer. But there's some things that you might want to do before you get everything all planted and irrigation is certainly ... There's some great systems out there now that are very easy for the home gardener to put together or you can even just call in an expert to figure out if you're running longer lines from your hose.

You can have timers that you put on them so especially if you do go away, it'll make sure that your garden is watered and if it rains, it won't water it. There's nothing worse than seeing sprinklers when it's raining on a lawn. There's just all sorts of great technology out there now that allow you to easily water your garden. And I even found one that it's just a little spike and you use a water bottle upside down and there's drip lines between all the plants that helped to water the garden. So lots of great water out there.

Theresa: Yeah, that's nice because if you're going to set this all up and then go on vacation because the soil is raised up and gets warmed up, it can dry out. So you don't want to come back from your trip and have lost everything. That's for sure.

Tara: No. It'll be very heartbreaking.

Theresa: Yeah. Well Tara, what would you say to someone who's even considering maybe just putting in one raised bed? Just in closing, what would you say to encourage them?

Tara: I would say that even for experienced gardeners, it's still trial and error. So if something doesn't work out your first season, try again. And just maybe do a little bit of research to see perhaps if it was a soil issue or a watering issue or spacing issue with your plants, but don't give up.

Theresa: Good advice, very good advice. Well, thank you so much for coming on. I really appreciate it because I think this is enough to wet people's whistle. If they have a spot that they're like, "Huh, maybe this would be a good place to put a raised bed." I definitely think that you've encouraged them to do that. So thanks so much for coming on.

Tara: Thank you. It's been great chatting with you.

Theresa: So I hope you enjoyed that conversation with Tara Nolan, the author of Raised Bed Revolution. As I said before, I will have in the show notes for this episode everything that Tara talked about, including some of the resources that she mentioned, her website, her book. And I'm also going to have in the show notes some information on how you calculate out how much soil you need if you were



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going to be purchasing your soil in bulk. It can be a little intimidating to do the math. It's super easy, I promise. Tara has information in her book on how to do it, and I will list out how you calculate that in the show notes. So to get to the show notes, just go to livinghomegrown.com/124.

So that's it for today. Thank you so much for joining me here on the podcast. I really appreciate it that you took time out of your busy day to listen. So until next time, just try to live a little 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.