

THE CHORE-LESS GARDEN

BY AMY SAND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISON BICKEL

Meeet Colleen Christensen, a young professional and new mother whose container garden is less work and more happy-routine. When I arrive at Colleen's home, I ring the doorbell and she waves me in. She's standing at the top of the stairs with her almost-one-year-old, Eva, shyly sitting on her hip. As we introduce ourselves, she plays with Eva. It's clear this is her natural, fervent self: relaxed, even though she's had a full day of accounting in Downtown Omaha. As we move through her Millard home, I notice it's unencumbered with excess, and the small, thoughtful touches stand out: a photo collage with a chalkboard that says "Chris loves Colleen;" an artisan wood picnic table where her family dines. This careful consideration of details, this avidity for objects made with love, is apparent in everything she touches, including her garden.

We leave the kitchen and walk down the stairs to the backyard. Spanning the length of her deck stands a container garden: two graduated wooden boxes, 20 feet long, one and a half feet deep and three feet tall. She calls it her "salsa garden," as staples include peppers (jalapeños and bell), tomatoes (Celebrity,



Early Girl and cherry) and onions. Every once in a while she'll plant something new, like Swiss chard or spinach. The pavers underneath were a later, necessary addition, after one year's zucchini and cucumbers refused to be contained.

It's a fruitful garden, producing plenty for this family of three and enough to distribute to chosen family and friends. More than a hobby, gardening has been a source of entertainment for Colleen and her siblings since childhood. "It seems like these days kids are go, go, go, with soccer practice and volleyball," laughs Colleen. "We were out in the garden for an hour a day."

Growing up in Genoa, a small Nebraska town with fewer than 1,000 residents, Colleen's mother had plenty of space for her 40- by 60-foot garden. Colleen, her brother and sister were each given several rows to tend and cherish. It was a time for bonding: working the land together and sharing in the fresh crop. Every evening, they'd pick fresh sweet corn or pull carrots for a dinner side dish. Colleen's smile widens as she talks about her most cherished memory, turning zucchini into breads, cakes and her favorite, brownies.

With such a large garden, canning was a natural progression. Her mother canned green beans and tomatoes. Colleen adopted the practice. Last year from her own garden, she canned 15 pints of tomatoes and rationed them throughout the winter. "It's a real treat" says Colleen. The process of canning tomatoes takes two to three hours: peeling the fruit, sanitizing and filling the jars before placing them in a water bath. If the equipment or time commitment intimidates you, she suggests peeling and quartering the tomatoes before sticking them in the freezer.

So how does Colleen, a mother, daughter, wife, homeowner and full-time accountant find time to be a gardener, too? As we chat in her kitchen, she's simultaneously, and calmly, feeding her daughter. This harmony is not only in her actions, but in her personality as well: Throughout our conversation she is breezy and joyful.

Of course not everyone is blessed with a peaceful presence and decades of gardening experience. Colleen says that shouldn't stop you. Yes, there is an initial time investment (it took Colleen and her husband two weekends to set up the container garden), but it will be worth the reward. "It is nice to go, 'I need a pepper,' and then go out and grab one." Even the convenience of a grocery store can't lure her away. "Yes, Hy-Vee is right around the corner, but there's nothing like grabbing a tomato fresh from the garden." Anyone who's experienced this summer treat will surely agree.

Maintenance is quick: She spends just 20 minutes week, 5 to 10 minutes every other day, tending the garden. In the morning while Eva is sleeping, she'll make time to water. When she needs to weed, she'll place Eva in a bouncy chair beside her and gets to work.

Not all plants thrive in containers. Colleen planted sweet corn, but it didn't take. She says it's important not to get discouraged when the yield isn't what you expected. "Some years you're luckier than others." She and her husband joke that the dry corn stalks will be the perfect harvest decorations (and they will). This happy-accident optimism is central to their lifestyle.

As our conversation wraps up, she grabs her phone and shows off her creative side. She's found another use for her garden: arranging

produce into funny faces and sharing photos of them on Instagram. My favorite arrangement looks like a '90s cartoon character, with tomato eyes, a cucumber nose and a bushel of snow pea made to look like spiky hair.

So what does it take to have a healthy garden that doesn't steal your days? As in most routines and responsibilities in life, attitude is everything: "I refuse for it to be a chore." More than that, she finds explicit joy in it. ✕

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Opposite: Growing up, Colleen, her brother and sister were each given several rows to tend and cherish in the family garden. It was a time for bonding: working the land together and sharing in the fresh crop. Here she continues that tradition with her daughter, Eva.

Below: Colleen is very considerate of details, and her avidity for objects made with love is apparent in everything she touches, including her garden.

