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Sow and grow those groceries

Is and pits from kitchen scraps can be put in soil instead of the trash

BY JENNIFER WILLIS
The Portland Tribune, Jul 10, 2006

Instead of throwing away the pits and seeds of your grocery store and farmers market produce, you can use them to grow houseplants and even sow them in your garden.

About three years ago, I went on a sudden citrus kick. I was eating lots of oranges and tangerines, and so was tossing lots of rinds and seeds into the garbage.

One day I paused to consider the seeds. I thought back to how my mother used to suspend an avocado pit in a cup of water with toothpicks, growing a healthy plant to decorate the windowsill above the kitchen sink.

One of my houseplants recently had died, so I had an empty pot handy. I thought I'd see what would happen if I planted the citrus seeds. I left the pot in a sunny window and forgot about it.

Though I later learned that gardening experts recommend allowing seeds harvested from grapefruits, lemons, oranges and tangerines to soak in water overnight and then to cover the pot with plastic wrap after planting, I'd just picked the seeds clean of pulp and stored them in the refrigerator before putting them in the pot.

Maybe it was beginner's luck, but it wasn't long before I had a healthy batch of seedlings pushing up through the soil — so many that I recruited a second pot to thin the herd.

I was so excited about my little citrus trees that I thought I'd see what else I might be able to grow.



It won't rival the Florida orange-growers' brigade, but plants from store-bought fruits and veggies can make a Portland house a little greener.

JIM CLARK / THE PORTLAND TRIBUNE

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I started a “grocery garden.” I’ve grown honeydew melon, tomato and bell pepper plants — all from seeds harvested from purchased produce. Granted, the honeydew vine produced only one, disappointingly small melon, but I was in it more for the novelty than the harvest, so it was still exciting to watch these plants grow.

When I first tried making my own guacamole — not so simple when you know nothing about avocados — I looked at the leftover pits and remembered my mother’s kitchen windowsill, but I wanted to try planting the pits in soil instead.

I found instructions online — let the pit dry out, plant it with the tip facing up and just peeking out from the dirt — but nothing happened. Maybe it was because I’d neglected to remove the pit from the husk before planting — or maybe it had something to do with my plant-killer kitten who likes to dig up my pots.

If you are looking for a fruitful harvest from your grocery garden, keep in mind that much of the produce found in stores is grown from hybrid seeds, and growing plants from these harvested seeds may not produce a secondary crop.

Some manufacturers treat their produce — like garlic, carrots and onions — with growth retardant to impede roots from developing during transport, and many “seed harvesters” suggest using only organic produce as seed sources.

Here in Oregon, we’re blessed with an abundance of locally grown, organic fruits and vegetables, and the first step toward seed harvesting is as close as your local farmers market.

Experienced seed harvesters recommend choosing produce that is especially ripe. Once you’ve dug out the seeds, they should be rinsed well, removing as much pulp as possible to prevent rot. The seeds should dry on a paper towel before planting.

Some grocery garden plants require more care and commitment than others — for instance, pomegranate seeds will germinate in about two months, but a pineapple plant grown from the crown of grocery store fruit can take up to three and a half years to bloom — so it’s a good idea to do a little fact-finding before you start harvesting and planting your seeds.

The Internet is a great source for growing instructions for a variety of harvested seeds. From YouGrowGirl.com’s user forums to the boards at iVillage’s Garden Web, you can find advice on growing just about anything you might think to harvest — even growing plants from the herbs in your spice rack.

Three years after my first grocery garden experiment, I still have one of my citrus trees, and though it’s still rather small (compared to an actual tree) and may not ever produce fruit, I envision one year decorating it as my yule tree.

In the meantime, I’m trying again with a new avocado pit — and keeping the cat away with a squirt gun.

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