

Meet your zone 10 testers!

One's a designer, one's a teacher; both are superb advisors for those who grow in America's warmest zone!

If you look at the "Almanac" section in the back of the magazine or page through last issue's *New Variety* reports, you'll note that Anya McCoy and Andres Mejides are the regional tester/advisors OG has assigned to help folks grow food and flowers in the southern third of the Florida peninsula—and in any other areas that would be identified as USDA zone 10, whether they're actually in the US of A or not.

And, like we said last issue, it's my job this year to introduce you to your specific "zoners." So, all you folks in Florida and other semi-tropical climes—listen up! Did you know that Anya McCoy's e-mail address is "Rastapoodle"? Or that Andres Mejides knows how to get a papaya to change its sex overnight (does it become a mamaya?)? Hey, these are fascinating people. Ladies first.

ANYA MCCOY MIAMI SHORES, FLORIDA

Anya, like our esteemed Editor McG, was born in Philadelphia, which you can tell if you ask her to pronounce her place of birth (Fill-Elf-ya), "cherries" (churries) or "berries" (burries). Now she lives in Miami Shores, which she describes as an older neighborhood of single-family homes built in the '30s and '40s, and located about 5 miles north of downtown Miami between I-95 and the Bay.

She received an undergraduate degree in economic botany in 1978 from the University of California at

Riverside, then got a Masters in landscape architecture at the State University of New York at Syracuse. She moved to Florida in 1985, settling first in the Tampa area, then moved to Miami in 1992, where she now designs gardens, mostly for private clients. "I specialize in fragrant, herbal, edible gardens—places that celebrate all the sensual delights," she says, adding that her gardens are soft, but with strong visual accents and bright colors worked in.

Her interest in the organic method of gardening goes back to 1972, when she started reading OG. But her interest in gardening in *general* goes back much further. "I start-



ed gardening when I was 3, in my parents' yard in Philly," she reports. "I remember filling the front yard with zinnias when I was 4 or 5. I was always out there. I liked the mechanical part of gardening—even mowing the grass. I learned to use a scythe when I was just a kid."

She also liked fragrances as a kid, a penchant that has now matured into a business marketing her own line of essential oils—"Anya's Tropical Essences"—that she says won't turn sour on the skin in the heat and humidity of south Florida, "the way French perfume does." Her sweet-smelling line includes amber oil from the Cedar of Lebanon tree, frankincense, vetiver, lavender, jasmine and (—choke!—) patchouli.

In a south Florida garden, she

BY JEFF COX



notes, the vegetable-growing season is pretty much opposite the way it was in the old days in Philly. Tomato seeds are started in August and September and the transplants are set out into the garden in October. From then through April, she explains, is the season in which “you can grow just about all the northern summer crops.”

But from May to September, the rule is scorching heat and humbling humidity. “You *may* be able to grow a few things—southern peas, okra and maybe some malabar spinach—but I like to give the garden a rest, and let it sleep through the summer,” she reveals, adding that one of the biggest mistakes made by gardeners down here is to try and keep the same schedule they did as when they lived up north, despite the weather. “Starting a food garden in the spring is a recipe for disaster here,” she notes emphatically.

One of the *year-round* problems in south Florida is a very high soil pH—because the entire peninsula is based on limestone bedrock. “The answer is to use tons of compost,” she notes, adding that “it’s really good to have a shredder to *get* those tons of compost.” But even without a shredder to reduce big chunky things down to a more quickly compostable size, she notes that “things still rot *quickly* in this climate.”

Anya also feels that watering via overhead sprinklers speeds the *al-ready* fast loss of organic matter from these soils, and leaches nutrients down and out of the reach of vegetables’ roots. “So I recommend using drip irrigation,” she notes; “that way you’re only putting the water where it’s needed.”



Anya McCoy (opposite) coaxes tropical treasures from her Miami Shores, Florida garden. Some favorites: Mexican tarragon (above left), dwarf bananas (above) and lemongrass (right).

Her other top tips for south Florida gardeners? First, “be sure and take advantage of all the exotic plants offered by the thousands of nurseries in places like Dade County. I’ve found the plants of my dreams here.” Some favorites she names are Thai herbs, lemongrass, exotic bananas from India, galangal and—choke!—patchouli.

On the pest control front, she says to be sure and spend some time negating your nematodes, flinching a bit at the mere mention of these microscopic root gobblers. “It’s hard to grow *anything* if you don’t kill the nematodes in your soil first; they are a *big* problem here,” she warns. Her specific solution? “Solarize the soil in each bed every 4 years by leveling the ground, wetting it, and then cov-



ering it with clear plastic and letting it cook for 6 to 8 weeks.”

Although the local insect problems are exacerbated by the rarely-if-ever-freezing Florida climate, she says that healthy organic plants *can* resist most attacks. When bugs such as aphids, leaf miners or caterpillars *do* gain some ground, she uses Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*, a naturally-occurring and organically approved caterpillar killer), hot pepper and garlic sprays, or insecticidal soap mixed with a bit of summer oil (a very light horticultural oil that can be used during the growing season) to keep them in check.

The relatively constant heat and humidity also promote the growth of diseases on plants, but she finds that a mixture of baking soda (3 teaspoons per gallon of water) and summer oil (one tablespoon per gallon) keeps the problem at bay. "People often think their tomatoes are shriveling from the heat in May, but it's usually early blight causing the problem. Even this tough disease can be successfully controlled with weekly baking soda and oil sprays—it allows the tomatoes to keep going for weeks longer," she assures us.

Finally, she reveals that the favorite part of her own garden is her "reggae border," so named "because Ziggy Marley's drummer, Squidly Cole, actually helped me put in the yellow marigolds, red begonias and red and green bananas," she says proudly. (Those plants provide the "official" rasta/reggae/Jamaican colors—green, yellow and red.) I-rie, Anya. Now I know why surfers of *all* sorts can reach you at "Rastapoodle@super.zippo.com"!