Bruce Benson is a third generation farmer with decades of experience and a humbling, modest sensibility that grows with the seasons. Bruce’s grandfather, who bought the land in 1900, began raising dairy cows and cultivating the land to support the family. At a young age, Bruce gave a helping hand and acquired a natural sense for agriculture and a blossoming curiosity to learn more. He graduated from MSU with a degree in agriculture and, along with his natural green thumb, has been carrying the family tradition ever since. Benson’s Farm is now home to a 20-acre diversified farm that no longer hosts cows, but is home to lots of sweet corn and a plethora of other seasonal crops.

Coming soon to his farm stand near you is everything from squash to broccoli, sugar beets, king size kohlrabi, hot peppers and more! Don’t forget about his current claim to fame, his sought after sweet corn, the kind that’s so good it barely needs butter. Benson’s Farm also uses their greenhouses to grow and sell bedding plants that keep Bruce busy even after the harvest and into early spring. Bruce is a hardworking man with a genuine smile, and, if you were to ask him what his favorite vegetable is, he would say, “anything that grows.”

The farm is his livelihood but also where Bruce feels at home. He takes a lot of pride in the family legacy and continues to do them proud each bountiful season. These tasty treasures are ready for sale now and Benson’s Farm will be open seven days a week from 9 AM- 6 PM. So come shop, sample and enjoy Montana’s local harvest and say “hello” to Bruce!
FINDING SPACE TO GROW VEGGIES AND FRUIT

Do you wish you could grow your own fresh, delicious vegetables or fruit? You probably can! If your apartment has a patio or balcony, or if you live in a house with a yard, no matter how small the yard is, you can grow some of your own food (figure 1).

All you have to do is select the right fruits or vegetables for the space you have, make sure they have rich soil or planting media to grow in, and give them adequate water, fertilizer, and sunlight.

If you want to start your vegetables from seeds, remember that Montana has a limited growing season, so only buy seed varieties that will mature in fewer than 100 days. Be sure to follow the instructions on the packet for when to start the seeds and set the seedlings outside. When selecting fruit bushes, vines, or trees, only choose varieties that will grow in USDA zone 4. Even though Missoula is USDA zone 5, we often experience erratic weather – early thaws, late freezes, and unstable temperatures that may kill zone 5 plants, especially if they are in containers.

If you have a balcony or patio, you can grow edibles in containers (figure 2). Use pots that are at least 14 inches in diameter and 12 inches deep for most vegetables and herbs. Chives, garlic, and onions will do fine in shallower containers. Special flexible containers can be used to grow potatoes or other root vegetables. Fill your containers with raised bed planting media rather than potting soil, if possible. If you must use potting soil, mix it with compost. Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and even some super-dwarf fruit trees such as nectarines and cherries are available in varieties developed to be grown in containers. You will need exceptionally large containers for fruit trees. If you want your bushes or trees to last more than one year, wrap the pots each winter with insulating material to reduce freeze-thaw damage to the roots, and make sure the soil stays damp but not saturated.

You can use vegetables and fruits ornamentally in your landscape rather than clearing a spot for a vegetable garden. Add them where they will get enough sunlight and there’s enough space for their roots to grow. Turn the soil over and mix some fertilizer in before you plant. Strawberry plants make a great flowering and edible ground cover (figure 3). Garlic leaves provide a vertical accent among low-growing ornamentals. A grape vine on a fan trellis can be lovely. Even rhubarb has a nice shape if well fertilized. Many cruciferous vegetables and some lettuces have charmingly ruffled leaves, and some have interesting variegated colors. Fruit trees have lovely blooms in the spring.

Another great option for small yards is growing your vegetables in raised beds. Well-watered beds with rich soil can grow a lot more vegetables per square foot than traditional garden plots (figure 4). Raised beds are also easy to weed, water, and to protect from marauding animals, bugs, and slugs.

If your balcony, patio, or gardening area is a little shady, try growing strawberries, lettuce, parsley, basil, chives, or other fruits and vegetables that don’t require a full day of sunshine.

If your patio, balcony, or garden gets sun almost all day, you can grow tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, short-vined pumpkins (figure 5), dwarf melons, and other heat and sun-loving vegetables and fruits. Especially if your balcony, patio, or gardening area gets afternoon sun, make sure the soil doesn’t ever dry out completely.

So go on – get inventive! Find places to grow your own fruits and vegetables. Your taste buds will thank you.
Mushrooms are a great way to increase your garden yield. There are several varieties suited for our growing conditions here in Montana. Some of these can be perennial with some simple supplements from the gardener. Other varieties need re-inoculation each year. Growing mushrooms at home provides another type of food and a good source of protein with relatively little effort. They are low in sodium, cholesterol and fats, but are high in dietary fiber and other nutrients. Some even say that mushrooms can help boost your immune system and certain varieties may have anti-carcinogenic properties. Or grow them for fun and their good taste!

The cultural needs of mushrooms are simple. They need some light, proper temperatures, even moisture and some source of food. They do not do well in full sun, but the northern side of an irrigated raised bed would be an ideal spot for them to grow. With shade from the side of a raised bed, the plants growing in them and the water from irrigation, the only other requirement is a growing medium.

As you know, mushrooms are decomposers. They are one of the few organisms that can break down fibrous and woody plant materials like cellulose and lignin. Some mushrooms are grown on compost, hay or softwoods such as pine, spruce or fir. However, most mushrooms prefer hardwoods. Which hardwood preferred is dependent on the species of mushroom you want to grow. Some are not picky at all. Although not a hardwood, here in Montana, cottonwoods or poplar are a readily available source of wood for growing fungi.

Two simple ways to grow mushrooms at home are:

1) Inoculate a hardwood compost pile in a shady corner of your yard.

2) Inoculate a freshly cut log and place it in your garden.

In the vegetable garden, mushrooms will need protection from the direct sun, as described above. Oyster and Lions Mane mushrooms are good choices to start with and their inoculant is easy to get either online or from local sources (Garden City Fungi in Huson, MT). There are several ways to inoculate your logs with spores, this article describes and shows the totem method.

You need a log approximately 12 inches in diameter with at least one end cut straight so when you stand it on end it will not fall over. If it is not straight, you can trim it up with a chainsaw. This log should be about 18 inches long. These measurements are just suggestions, but other sizes will work too. With your chainsaw, cut the 18 inch long log in half so that you have two (approximately 9 inch sections) shorter logs. Note or mark where they fit together. One will serve as a base and the other as a top. On the top of the base log, with the tip of your chainsaw, rout out a grid pattern (similar to a tic tac toe board pattern) about one half inch deep, not cutting all the way to the outside of the log. Cut to about one inch from the outside bark. This channel will hold your inoculant. With clean gloves, place your choice of inoculant in this groove to fill. Replace the top of your log back on in the orientation it came off for the best fit. To secure the two halves together, take three or four nails (2.5 to 3 inch long nails are good) and toenail the two pieces together around the perimeter.

This log can be placed in any shady spot. It should receive water to maintain moisture as you would your garden plants. It takes time for the mycelium to colonize the log and then additional time, moisture, and proper temperatures to produce a crop of mushrooms. Have patience, and you could have a spring and fall crop of mushrooms. Easy ones to try first are Grey Oysters and Lions Mane. Have fun and enjoy!
So much of gardening is getting to know plants. What they like or don’t, where they grow best, when to seed and harvest them, and even who they’re related to. Knowing plant families not only helps you sustain a healthy garden soil, it also provides cool insight into the plants. This year, I’m trying to save lettuce seeds for the first time. Looking into it, the seeds are ready when they produce a pappus—a fluffy part of the seed head found only in the Asteraceae family. Turns out this family includes lettuce and dandelions. I never knew these two were related, but now that my lettuce has produced tiny yellow flowers, it’s like realizing you know someone’s brother and suddenly starting to recognize that same nose on both faces. Maybe not exactly like that, but the flowers do look similar, and the fluffy seeds head they produce will be similar to the dandelion seed balls I see in my lawn.

It’s incredible the variety in plant families, and even more so when it’s a result of human influence. One of my most shocking discoveries of late was realizing kale, Brussel sprouts, cauliflower, and cabbage are all the same species. I knew they were in the same Brassica family, but turns out they are all varieties of the same species. The entire brassica family, which includes broccoli, kohlrabi, and collard greens too, come from one plant Brassica oleracea.

The plant comes from the coast of countries along the Mediterranean, where around 2,000 years ago it grew as a wild mustard. People began planting it in their gardens, and slowly began selecting seeds for different traits. The results today are different cultivars—“a plant variety that has been produced in cultivation by selective breeding.” A cultivated variety can be denoted by the species, with a “var. ________.” For example, cauliflower is written as Brassica oleracea var. Botrytis. You’ll notice the Brassica oleracea is constant from that mustard 2,000 years ago.

The idea of cultivars isn’t unique to the Brassica family. Virtually all crops have cultivars, which explains the selection of apples we see in the grocery store. (The idea that apple trees can accept another branch and start producing two varieties on the same tree is a whole other article, and source of plant magic). Brassicas seem unique to me in the incredible variety of growth patterns.

Turns out humans have been getting to know plants and working with them as long as we’ve been around. Maybe that’s why so many of us love to be out in the garden, getting to know our plants.
CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MASTER GARDENER CONTINUING EDUCATION SEMINAR SERIES
Starting in October, Missoula County Master Gardener will be kicking off a monthly seminar series! This free event is open to the public and will take place on the first Monday evening of each month from 6:00 PM – 7:30 PM at the Extension office on Santa Fe Court. We have a great line-up, so see below and stay tuned each newsletter!

CFAC’s Farmer Field Day - Reducing On-Farm Carbon Footprint
September 18th – 4:00 PM - Lifeline Produce, Victor
Contact Mary to sign up 926-1004, BFRprogram@missoulacfac.org

L&L Garden Fresh Pizza - September 18th – 12:00-1:00 PM
Join us for a unique personal pizza dinner to celebrate the season’s harvest, $12. Contact Kelly to sign up 258-4206

Ask a Master Gardener at Clark Fork Market Booth
September 28th – 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Botanical Book Club - The Botany of Desire
October 3rd – 6:00 PM - Draught Works Brewery, Missoula

MG Seminar Series: Growing Garlic – Kaley Hensel, Missoula County Extension - October 7th – 6:00 PM

L&L Garlic Greatness - November 13th – 12:00-1:00 PM
Keep those spooky vampires away this Halloween! Learn about types of garlic, growing, harvesting, braiding and preparing, $12. Contact Kelly to sign up 258-4206

Master Gardener Arboretum Tour with Dr. Peter Kolb
October 15th – 5:30 PM (meet on west side of UC at “The Root”)

CFAC’s Farmer Field Day - Hops Production Infrastructure
October 16th – 4:00 PM - Bell Crossing Farms, Stevensville
Contact Mary to sign up 926-1004, BFRprogram@missoulacfac.org

L&L Garlic Greatness (Seeley Lake) - November 13th – 12:00-1:00 PM
$12. Contact Kelly to sign up 258-4206

MG Seminar Series: Reducing Garden Waste - Lauren O’Laughlin, Master Gardener Volunteer - November 4th – 6:00 PM

Botanical Book Club - Book TBD
November 7th – 6:00 PM - Draught Works Brewery, Missoula

L&L Simple Mustard, Exotic Spices - November 13th – 12:00-1:00 PM
Dress up a simple mustard recipe with spices from around the world. $12. Contact Kelly to sign up 258-4206

QUESTIONS? CONTACT KALEY, 258-4205 OR KALEY.HENSEL@MONTANA.EDU
BURIED TREASURE: FALL PLANTED BULBS ARE SPRING GARDEN GEMS

As the season tapers into fall this month, we wrap up another beautiful Montana summer. While our gardens may be getting ready for their winter’s rest, a little planning ahead this time of year can charm you with plentiful blooms next spring. With a small investment and a little work, fall planted bulbs offer beginner and Master Gardeners alike an abundance of early color and fragrance to welcome spring. Since bulbs are large and easy to handle, they are great for kids to plant, making this a fun fall activity the entire family can enjoy. The best part—many naturalize and get better each spring, providing years of beauty and enjoyment.

September and October are the best months for planting hardy bulbs that bloom in the spring since the warmer soil allows them to get well rooted before the ground freezes. If you already have swaths of yellow daffodils running through your garden, you may choose to incorporate unique varieties and other species that offer a mix of colors, sizes, shapes, textures, and bloom times to expand your diversity. When selecting bulbs for your garden, be sure to choose several varieties that will overlap in bloom time including early, mid, and late bloomers for a continuous vibrant spring display (Figure 1).

While tulips are a longtime favorite with a rich history, they are considered a tasty delicacy to deer and rodents. Members of the Amaryllis family, including daffodils, snowflakes, and snowdrops are surely a safe bet against hungry critters. Plants in this family contain lycorine, a bitter, poisonous substance, that no mammal will eat. Other bulbs like allium, hyacinth, and fritillaria ward away pests with their strong odors, but are not completely safe against hungry voles and pocket gophers tunneling beneath the soil. Hyacinths are highly fragrant and sweet smelling while fritillaria species, like crown imperials, smell skunky.

Bulbs don’t like to be too wet, so be sure to choose a place in the garden that offers rich soil, adequate moisture, and plenty of sunlight. Woodland bulbs do enjoy a shady spot making trout lilies, snowdrops, Spanish bluebells, crocus, spring beauty, and glory of the snow beautiful garden additions. Since bulbs are much larger than seeds, they like to be planted quite deep, at least twice as deep as they are long. Always plant pointy side up, and root side down. While this can be easier to determine for tulips and daffodils, rounder bulbs, like crocus, may require a closer look. At the time of planting, use a phosphorus rich slow release fertilizer or compost to feed your bulbs; after planting, be sure to water them in. Mulching over these newly buried treasures is a great way to keep them well insulated over winter. To keep your bulbs flourishing year after year, cut off spent blooms before they go to seed and allow the leaves to turn completely yellow before trimming back; by doing so, the plant stores more energy for bigger blooms the following season.

A simple, clustered planting of bulbs offers a beautiful, natural looking, layered effect. For this planting method, use a shovel to dig a large hole (approximately 6 to 8 inches deep by a foot or more wide) and then toss in a handful of your larger bulbs like tulips, hyacinths, alliums, and daffodils (deer may be less likely to devour tasty buds if planted closely to more resistant species). Be sure to make some adjustments by placing the tossed bulbs root side down and spaced about 3 to 5 inches apart (Figure 2). Add some soil to the hole and toss in your next layer of smaller bulbs like crocus and grape hyacinth. Once again, adjust for positioning as needed and be sure that these smaller bulbs are not planted too deep. Scatter these clusters of bulbs across your garden and enjoy the dazzling display of blended blooming next spring.

Spring blooming bulbs aren’t the only garden gems to plant in fall. Summer bloomers like hardy lilies, irises, and many types of alliums, can be tucked into the garden this time of year too, providing a nice transition between spring flowering bulbs and other garden perennials (Figure 3). With fall planted alliums in mind, I encourage you to make garlic an addition to your garden this year! Join Missoula County Extension this October to learn all about growing, harvesting, and preparing garlic!