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A bountiful harvest rewards west-end gardener

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For Alan Christensen, autumn is a bittersweet time.

"A garden is always changing and you know it's not going to last forever," Christensen said. "On one hand it's sad to see it go but on the other it's a relief because it's so much work."

As Christensen wanders through his nearly acre of property, he stops to pick bell peppers while his grandson, Jacob, follows closely behind, eating an apple his mother, Anna, picked from a tree in the back of the garden.

French Marans and other exotic fowl peck at excess and over-ripened vegetables in a coop at the northern edge of the garden. A black cat trots between rows of cucumbers and tomatoes, patrolling for rabbits.

Along the northern edge of the garden, vines supporting a myriad of gourds reach towards the light, growing over the fencing into the neighbors' Russian olive trees.

These vines make up the most intriguing part of Christensen's garden: his gourd tunnel and hut creations.

The tunnel was created from cattle panel fencing, stacked side by side and two high, to create a 10-foot tall tunnel. The hut is built with a similar concept, composed of wire fencing and held up by wooden supports, decorated with white Christmas lights.

At first glance, the hut looks like something out of a science fiction film.

Long-handled and Short-handled Dippers hang inches from the ground, some boasting eight-foot long necks. Several of the necks of these gourds have been tied into a knot when small. As the gourd grows, the knot grows with it.

Goose and Tobacco Gourds twist against the wire supports, and cannonball gourds hang in the hut's entry. Small white ball, striped pear and a variety of warted gourds grow amongst the larger ones.

The graceful twisting gourds seem precarious as they dangle from the canopy, though Christensen has found as the gourd grows, the stem grows as well to support the plant. His largest gourd, a good 33-inches in diameter, weighs as much as 40 pounds.

Christensen started growing gourds five years ago, but this is the first year he created the gourd hut, inspired to do so by the fascination his grandson has with the gourd tunnel.

"I just thought that it would be fun," he said. "I think grandpas should be fun."

Cornucopia of Plants

A teacher at Montana State University Billings in the reading department, Christensen has lived at his west-end property for 22 years, growing his garden just as long.

Prior to being a teacher, Christensen was a landscaper for 25 years, generating inspiration for his unique garden creations.

In the summer months, Christensen spends three to four hours a day in the garden. He uses no chemicals in the garden, so his grandson can wander the property, picking and eating whatever he likes.

"The garden is all organic. You have weeds but it's safe for Jacob," said Cheryl Christensen, Alan's wife. "Jacob's learned to love the garden and would stay out here all day with his grandpa."

From the Mexican Sour Gherkins, a miniature cucumber that looks like a tiny watermelon to the Granny Smith tomatoes, which stay green even when ripe, Christensen enjoys growing a variety of plants.

Sharing the Wealth

What can Christensen possibly do with the hundreds of gourds and endless vegetables he harvests from his garden?

"He gives everything away," said Cheryl. "The whole neighborhood eats from the garden. He is so serving and giving that way."

"When you grow this much you have to find a use for them," he said. "I grow things but don't necessarily know how to cook them. I don't like to eat hot peppers, but love to grow them."

From miniature eggplants to dozens of colorful hot peppers, Christensen gives away his harvest, telling friends and family, "If you find a good recipe, let me know."

Generally, gourds are used more for utilitarian uses than for food.

It is one of the earliest plant species domesticated by humans, and originally used as containers before clay pottery.

Because of the hard outer surface that forms when dried, the gourd can be used for many purposes, including carving, sculpture, basketry and musical instruments.

Each year, Christensen takes gourds to MSUB for the art department. His office is covered with gourds of all shapes and sizes, in the process of drying.

End of Season

As Christensen begins dismantling his garden for the year, he continues to find gourds hidden in the miles of vines.

"One of my earliest memories is of my mother in the garden," Christensen said. "I remember moving leaves aside to harvest squash. You would see squash in all colors; it was like a giant Easter egg hunt. I still feel it's like that out here."

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