



Michael Brown picks blackberries in his backyard garden that will be used for blackberry jam or other sweet treats.



Optic Illusion dahlia

‘Fruits of their labor’

a garden of riches for Mechanicsville couple
By HOLLY PRESTIDGE | Richmond Times-Dispatch |
photos by ALEXA WELCH EDLUND

A small wooden sign hangs from the arbor at the entrance to Michael and Solange Brown’s backyard garden and reads simply, “Poor Man’s Paradise.”

Stepping inside, it’s a smorgasbord for the senses as tasty things sprawl over the ground and eye candy blooms. It’s this space where the couple finds an escape from everyday life — but also the makings of breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks in between.



Cherry tomatoes

Sweet cherry tomatoes and large heirloom tomatoes cling to sturdy rebar forms next to 25-pound watermelons and cantaloupes as large as bowling balls. There are zucchini

and cucumbers, bright peppers of various heat levels, wispy asparagus plants and heads of cabbage.

An impressive cactus bed provides fruit for golden prickly pear jelly and a healthy herb garden boasts basil, rosemary, oregano, thyme and more.

Lush blackberry bushes line one side of the property and almost conceal the nearby vines of Concord, muscadine and seedless white grapes. The smallest crop — a single eggplant plant — produces just enough to satiate Michael Brown’s urge for the occasional meal of eggplant Parmesan, he says with a grin.

Solange Brown finds beauty in the eggplant’s rich color — its taste, not so much.

A few rows of corn grow near yellow wax beans and green beans. Onions — 160 in all, as Michael Brown noted — have been harvested and hang in the shed. Additionally, carrots and broccoli have been pulled and packed into the freezer. Sweet



Onions

potatoes come later — up to 100 pounds worth.

But among the vast edible goodness is Michael Brown's other love.

Vibrant, beautiful dahlias of all colors and sizes — 55 varieties in all — are the result of years spent working to turn his clay-ridden Mechanicsville soil into a nutrient-rich area that thrives.

Solange Brown's hot blackberry cobbler cooled on the stove as her husband scooped homemade cantaloupe ice cream into glass dishes. Light and refreshing, it tasted like summer on a spoon.

A walk through the garden this time of year is a one-stop snack shop with cherry tomatoes and big blackberries available by the handful. The couple's bounty is often shared with friends and loved ones, though much of it gets juiced, chopped and otherwise prepared and packed away for the winter, if not eaten raw.

Brown likes that much of their diet comes from their own garden. (Meat comes during the fall and winter when he hunts.) What they grow sustains them throughout the winter months, though the processing started months ago.

Scallions, lettuce and spinach, in early spring, followed by asparagus in April and May, then broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage at the start of summer and now bushels of tomatoes and everything else.

Extra freezers in their home already are packed full of frozen goods, everything from the broccoli and carrots and corn to juices, such as grape, watermelon and tomato. Watermelon juice, they noted, makes for delicious martinis.



Watermelon

It's taken years to get to this point. The couple bought their home in the mid-1990s. At the time, there was a small crop of blackberry bushes in the backyard as well as crab apple, sour cherry and apple trees out front. But since then, Brown said he's spent countless hours augmenting the hard-packed clay soil with gypsum and peat moss and ton after ton of compost.

He said he never planned on having the glorious garden it has become. But that's "sort of indicative of how I work," he said. "My brain's alive, and if it gets on a project, it's going to push it to the

boundary."

A licensed counselor and marriage and family therapist, Michael Brown said getting outside to work in the garden gets his juices flowing, and that energy carries over into his job and the rest of his life. His wife — a Quebec native — is a watercolor artist.

He grew up in Northern Virginia and has lived all over the United States, though wherever he settled, he always had a vegetable garden.

The dahlias, however, are a relatively new passion. The Browns were married in San Francisco and returned there in 2002 for their 25th wedding anniversary. During their trip, they visited Golden Gate Park and happened upon a dazzling dahlia display.

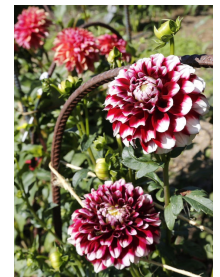


Being among the flowers with the love of his life stirred something in Brown and "to carry that feeling forward," he said, "the next spring I started growing dahlias. Then it became an obsession."

Among his favorite varieties today are Cloudburst, Wildcat, Optic Illusion and Checkers. He buys his flowers from Oregon-based Swan Island Dahlias. The Browns visited the 40-acre property — which they dubbed the "motherland" — several years ago. "It's like going to the Vatican," Michael Brown said jokingly.

His dahlias are blooming now and will do so through September. They decorate the house, Brown's office and their friends' homes. When their daughter got married three years ago, the Browns simply walked out back for flowers for the arrangements. A friend of their daughter did the same thing last year.

"I so love gardening and being independent and eating what we grow," Brown said. But "to border (the vegetables) with the dahlias, it's just an ecstatic experience for me to be out here. It's just fantastic."



Checkers