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Garden geek

Former dancer now inspires organic gardeners

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON



Gardenerd.com founder Christy Wilhelmi shares her science-based tips in "Gardening for Geeks."

lives and gardens in the West Los Angeles neighborhood of Mar Vista. "I dove into gardening. Now, I never want to do anything else. It became my living."

Wilhelmi teaches organic gardening through Santa Monica College's community education program. Her book mirrors her class curriculum, covering the basics of soil, planning, planting and what to grow. She tackles pest management, irrigation, composting and more in information-packed pages that make the science of gardening fun and easy to digest. It's a great guide for beginners, but also has plenty of ideas for experienced gardeners.

Wilhelmi believes in making the most of limited space. In just 300 square feet, she's able to produce most of what she eats.

Her favorite vegetables? "I love growing kale; I have 14 different varieties. I love how beautiful they look in the garden. They each have a different texture and flavor; some are better for chips, others better for salads."

"For summer, I'm addicted to growing winter squash," she added. "They're so pretty. I love delicata squash; they're delightful and delicious."

Her best tip for beginners: "Worm castings!" she said. "They solve a lot of problems. They're really high in nutrients; a little goes a long ways. And they help with pest control, too."

Christy Wilhelmi is proud to be a garden geek.

Her popular website and blog, Gardenerd.com, has become a must-read for organic gardeners who want inspiration as well as science-based tips on growing food.

Wilhelmi's best advice and loads of valuable information are distilled into her book, *Gardening for Geeks: All the Science You Need for Successful Organic Gardening* (CompanionHouse Books, 248 pages, \$19.99). Just published, it is an updated and expanded version of her original 2013 book by the same name.

"A lot of the updates were bringing people up to speed with climate change, how important and threatened pollinators are, how these changes affect the natural world around us," she said in a phone interview.

Wilhelmi also updated her pruning techniques and added more vegetables to her plant profiles.

"The first edition, I stuck with easy to grow veggies," she said. "This time, I added celery, cabbage, corn, cucumber, eggplant and watermelon. These crops are a little trickier and take some skill to get going."

Take watermelon, for example. "Timing is everything," Wilhelmi said. "Plant them too early, they just sit there. But if you don't plant early enough, you'll be eating watermelon in November."

A former professional dancer and model, Wilhelmi got into food gardening when she decided to become a vegetarian 27 years ago.

"The more I learned about the food system, the more I wanted control of it," said Wilhelmi, who



CAMELLIA DAY

This warm February has really brought out the camellias, Sacramento's official flower.

See scores of beautiful blooms—and learn how to grow this popular shrub—during the sixth annual Camellia Day at the historic Murer House, 1125 Joe Murer Court, Folsom. Set for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 29, Camellia Day will feature a judged competition, guest speakers, raffle and more. Admission is free.

Details and directions: murerhouse.org.

Debbie Arrington, an award-winning garden writer and lifelong gardener, is co-creator of the Sacramento Digs Gardening blog and website.