

Little sun, small space no problem for gardener



Toni Sopocko closes the bin to her vegetable garden.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

Publisher's note: *This is one in a random series of stories about gardening in Lake Tahoe.*

By Kathryn Reed

Growing vegetables doesn't require a large plot or a ton of hours each day. Just ask Toni Sopocko.

Her husband, Steve, built her two structures that sit in the sunniest spot of their Tahoe Mountain backyard.

To keep the rodents out – which have been more of a problem since the 2007 Angora Fire – mesh was first put on the ground. Then Steve Sopocko used scrap wood from projects – mostly old

decks he tore up – as the frame for the two gardening boxes. Chicken wire covers the four sides and top. Even though it's enclosed, voles can squeeze through the wire.



Enclosed veggie boxes help keep out critters.

Toni Sopocko got into gardening somewhat on a whim about three years ago.

“It sounded like fun and I wanted to grow stuff,” she said.

Sometimes not all of the lettuce makes it inside for the daily salad. It's sweet right out of the ground. Tender to the touch, it almost seems like a delicate flower that should be treated with kid gloves, even revered. It would be easy to sit and munch the morning away.

“I pinch off the leaves as I need them,” Sopocko said of the lettuce. She said the key is to snip off the flowers so the lettuce will keep growing.

Nothing goes to waste. Eventually some of it will end up in their mulch pile.

Good soil is a common thread among those who garden successfully in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The Sopockos have a connection where they can get horse manure in the fall that is added to the soil.

Still, Sopocko says their gardening is more trial and error

than science.

She tried peppers, but they didn't work. Not enough intense sun where she lives on the South Shore. Zucchini has done well in the past, but it's not something they both enjoy.

Sopocko admits the warm spring led her to start planting sooner than she should have. The lettuce is from seeds that she put in rows. When some didn't come up she added more seeds.

Next to the lettuce are carrots. The green stalks are well above ground, but the edible orange part is in the formative stage. She pulls one out to show just how tiny it is at this stage. If the recognizable stalk weren't there, it would be hard to know that was a carrot at the other end.

It will be a little while before they have fresh carrots in their salads. This is much to the chagrin of her dogs who like carrots right out of the ground.



Carrots and lettuce will be harvested at different times.

The snow peas will be ready in the next couple weeks. They are creeping up the devices she has stuck in the dirt so they don't just lay on the ground. Stir fries are a common use for these edibles. She also has English peas in this box. But like

the other produce, sometimes it never makes it into the kitchen.

In a nearby planter blueberries are being grown. This is a first for Sopocko. She figured she could risk the \$1.99 it cost her to see if it would bear fruit.

Sopocko chooses what to plant based in part on what will grow in the limited sunlight her beds get each day, veggies without potassium for health reasons, and things she knows will be successful in Tahoe's climate.

In the fall she plans to plant garlic that will then be ready in the spring.

To make things easy she has a timer on a hose that sits between the two veggie boxes. Each day it comes on for 10 minutes.

"Every other day or so I pull weeds. I don't do anything other than pick (veggies) now," Sopocko told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's not a lot of work when it's this small."

Even these two boxes, which aren't more than 4 feet by 2 feet, produce enough lettuce that the Sopockos are giving it away because it's too much for the two of them.