

## **Family New Year's Resolutions**

by Marlys Bell

Interestingly, New Year's resolutions pertaining to my personal life never last more than a few weeks. But making New Year's resolutions a family affair has focused energy, resources and discussion among family members and influenced choices and behaviors of extended family members as well as our immediate household. Slowly we are making progress toward our chosen lifestyle, which is to minimize our carbon footprint and to be more sustainable and self-reliant.

One of our major goals for 2009 was to be able to eat from the garden year round. Our garden produced beyond expectations. Swiss chard, kale, spinach, collards, lettuce, bok choy and other greens were available for picking throughout the winter of 2009 despite freezing conditions at our 2000 foot elevation. In the early spring, broccoli, broccoli raab, onions, beets, carrots, radishes, and asparagus added more variety to the menu. Soon potatoes, squash, cucumbers, rhubarb and strawberries became favorites followed shortly by corn, tomatoes, beans, garlic, peppers, eggplant and watermelon.

Surprisingly the challenges were not in the planting, picking, and preserving but in broadening family members taste buds to appreciate fresh picked, homegrown produce and to eat more fruits and vegetables. As a result, each family gathering featured fresh picked garden treats with the understanding that everyone had to taste, even if they had never tried them before. After all, it was from "grandma's garden." Soon strawberry-rhubarb concoctions rose from totally unknown to the most requested desert, spinach became the preferred salad green and ratatouille was recognized as more than a cartoon character.

Next year we look forward to enjoying more berries (e.g. blackberries, raspberries, blueberries) as well fruit from five new trees. Three are dwarf grafted trees with four different kinds of apples, or peaches and another with nectarine, peach, plum and apricot called a fruit salad. Because I am committed to organic methods and do not want to do extensive spraying for various bugs and diseases, the fruit tree experiment began modestly and with a new approach. Using permaculture concepts that imitate nature, I surrounded the trees with plants that attract beneficial bugs, repel bad bugs and add nitrogen to the soil. Instead of an orchard, the herbs and flowers (alyssum, marigolds, nasturtiums, borage, tansy, yarrow, comfrey and asters) make it look like an ornamental flower garden that is producing food for us, the butterflies, bees and other beneficial members of the environment.

In 2009, we extended the harvest by freezing surplus crops. We will consider that experience in plant selection and amount estimation for next year. In 2010 I am also looking forward to curing olives, canning chutneys, salsas, jam, and strawberry rhubarb sauce as well as drying tomatoes, fruit and beef jerky.

With family input, we are already talking about planting additional varieties of tomatoes that are better for sauce and fewer hot chili peppers since they were unused. And we definitely want to add more asparagus and another variety of strawberries that are larger, sweeter and less perishable. The beets were stringy and the foliage bitter so next year's planting will be limited to experimenting on how to improve the product. Because no one eats radishes they will be dropped from the list except for a few to act as sacrificial plants to attract the bad bugs.

In 2009 our two goats devoured the mistakes: surplus plants, unripe watermelons, and others that escaped detection and got too ripe or too big to eat. In 2010, in addition to compost piles and red wigglers (worms) we will have just two llamas with limited appetites, so we will have to consciously use more and waste less.

By next year's holiday season, I hope our family's palates and preferences will have expanded sufficiently so that they will appreciate a jar of home-grown jelly as much as something purchased at a big box store. Making a family resolution to live a more sustainable lifestyle is just the first step. Getting everyone excited and committed to it is a multi-year challenge, measured in small steps and incremental success. But the good news is that you have another year and each other to reinforce and reward progress and to keep the resolution alive and growing. HAPPY NEW YEAR!

*Marlys Bell and her husband, Jay are working to make their property a demonstration of how to live a more sustainable lifestyle.*