



Roger.Bull@jacksonville.com

Tim Armstrong grows herbs in his yard and teaches others how to do it through his business Eat Your Yard.

Your yard can be your farm

Getting people connected with growing food is this businessman's goal

By Roger Bull
roger.bull@jacksonville.com

Tim Armstrong can walk through the 3 cleared acres he's got in the middle of 40 acres of West Jacksonville woods and point out plant after plant that produces food: Pomegranate, plum, cassava, taro, elderberry, Zanzibar ginger, Egyptian spinach. And on and on...

He's got green houses, tanks with tilapia and catfish, logs that sit in the shade and every now and then produce mushrooms.

But what he wants to do is convince people they don't need that much room to grow food. So with his business Eat Your Yard Jax, he teaches them to do just that. Every Saturday, he's at the Beaches Green Market in Jacksonville Beach selling plants, giving ad-



Plums ripen at Tim Armstrong's farm on the Westside. He wants to convince people they can grow food in their yards, and they don't need that much room to grow food.

vice.

So what were you before you turned to growing things?

I was in management work for the wire industry. Well, five years with the U.S. Steelworkers Union and 15 years in management. We were there on wire road, on Lane Avenue where all the other wire companies are.

And how'd you get into this?
When I was young, I was in

FFA [Future Farmers of America]. I worked in the greenhouses. But I couldn't figure out how to make a living in it. But when I semi-retired from the wire company, I had a few rental properties. And I saw this small nursery for sale. So I bought that seven or eight years ago and it's blossomed into this.

You bought Fruit Cove Cactus and

EAT continues on D-3



Roger.Bull@jacksonville.com

Tim Armstrong's truck advertises his classes on growing your own food in your yard.

Continued from D-1

Foliage?

And I still do that. It's still a part of my businesses. I sell cacti and succulents to independent nurseries. I don't have any contracts with someone like Lowe's. The key to sustainability of the whole farm is the income streams to keep it going.

But the growing part is Eat Your Yard, and that's where my passion lies. Getting people back connected with food and the empowerment of being able to grow things in their own yard.

So I've spent the last seven years, especially the last four, learning what grows here, going to classes. I spent five months with Will Allen at Growing Power, learning commercial urban agriculture in Milwaukee.

That's a different growing climate.

It is, but I saw him speak at a small farm conference and I was really impressed. So I went up there.

What does your work actually consist of? Planting gardens yourself? Coming out and telling someone how to do it? Teaching classes?

All the above. And that's what it's taken to keep this rolling and above. It's a

little scattered and sundry, but it's all related to urban ag.

Most of us have quarter-acre suburban yards with lots of shade. What are the options for growing food?

You can actually do a lot. Take advantage of the sunny spot you've got and plant what you love. If you like orange juice, put an orange tree in the sun. Cultivate some blackberries along the back of the lot. Put in a little raised bed and grow some herbs you use in the kitchen. Put a nice fig tree in the corner. Plant attractive greens along the fence.

What really surprises you about what people can grow?

I'm really surprised about how many people waste the space they have and don't use it.

Look right here [pointing to a large pot] you've got lemongrass, kefir lime and Thai ginger. That's the holy trinity of Thai cooking. Anyone can grow that.

Many of us have a lot of shade.

My blueberries and blackberries don't get that much sun. Look at this pot of tumeric ginger. Full shade. It looks good and every year you harvest all the ginger you need for Indian cooking. Why grow just the ornamental kind?

What about the aquaculture. You've got big tanks for the tilapia. What can you do smaller?

I've got a self-contained unit on wheels that got a shipping tote full of 50 catfish. I'm trying to make it run strictly on solar. And I've got a 55-gallon drum that will produce 10 to 20 pounds of fish a cycle.

Finally, you've got worms. Lots of worms eating scraps for compost. Is that better

than traditional composting?

I think it is, just because the worms break it all down so much faster. A pound of worms eats a pound of food in two days.

Can I use the nightcrawlers from my yard?

They work, but I think red wigglers are a lot better. I sell a two-bucket system, so the bottom bucket can catch the worm tea, with worms for \$25. That's all a small family needs.

Obviously some people have gotten the religion. I've seen entire front yards — in nice neighborhoods, too — that have been turned into vegetable gardens. Thoughts on that?

You're talking to an urban ag guy. I think everybody should be doing it. I think it's much more attractive than a row of trimmed loropetalums.

Roger Bull: (904) 359-4296