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Palolo resident enjoys creativity, challenges of gardening

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"It's hard to overstate how gratifying it is to have a deep, heartfelt connection with a plot of earth, knowing that if I take care of it, it will feed me," said Fran Butera, pictured in her Palolo garden.

Fran Butera spent much of her 25-year career as a graphic designer confined within the four walls of an office while staring at a computer screen. When she turned 50, she was ready to move on to something new.

"I wanted to use the same skill set but do something that allowed me to be outdoors,"

she said.

Butera, 59, opened Foodscapes Hawaii in 2008, helping people design, build and maintain edible gardens.

"There's such a need for getting people to grow food," she said. "I'm constantly testing out gardening techniques that can be shared with clients."

Butera has lived in her Palolo home for 23 years. She refers to her tiered hillside garden as an "urban anykine garden." There are eight raised beds and more than 100 pots, an assemblage built slowly over time. Many of the areas are fenced in to keep her chickens, a white Andalusian and a Rhode Island Red, from wreaking havoc.

The items that require daily care are on the lower tier, closest to her house.

"Gardening is like art to me. It's like a three-dimensional blank canvas with form, color and texture," Butera said. "All design is about problem solving.

"It's serendipity to have different things blooming at the same time. You have to plan for how it will look in the weeks and months from when you plant, with all the variables changing at different rates. That's so much fun."

Butera spends about an hour in her garden each morning.

"The instant it's light out, I'm outside," she said. "The garden gives me a reason to be out there. I walk around and see what's going on, check for insect damage, and harvest and wash vegetables."

The raised beds are made with recycled-plastic lumber and equipped with automatic soaker hoses to irrigate food plants that include Mexican tarragon, cilantro, mustard, dill and other herbs, kale, lettuces, taro, peas and heirloom Listada de Gandia eggplant, which has distinctive purple and white streaks.

Her garden routine includes composting. "It's very important for me to recycle. I have a couple of different composting operations going on," Butera said.

One is a worm bin is supplied with shredded junk mail and food scraps; she also uses a rotating composting bin that turns yard and food waste into a nutrient-rich soil amendment that improves moisture retention.

"I love to turn the food scraps into nutrition."

On a physical level, Butera said she enjoys working outdoors, moving around and engaging all her senses.

"It's such a blessing after decades in offices, sitting and staring at a screen," she said. "It's hard to overstate how gratifying it is to have a deep, heartfelt connection with a plot of earth, knowing that if I take care of it, it will feed me."

Using fresh eggs from her chickens, she said she likes to make quiche with the greens and herbs from her garden. As for the eggplant, Butera likes to cut it into cubes and

pan fry in olive oil and garlic salt. Other dishes include eggplant Parmesan and eggplant curry.

"My daughter loves our basil pesto. I knew it was a winner when she started wanting it in her school lunches instead of mac and cheese. That is what mothers of picky eaters live for," she said.

"Having a garden can turn people into more adventurous cooks because you suddenly have to figure out, 'What am I going to do with all this fennel?'" (Butera has used fennel in cakes and said "it's not bad.")

Learning which plants will do well in your yard and taking note of the seasons will help ensure good results, she said.

For example, in Butera's yard, the summer sun is overhead but in December it hides behind the ridges and trees, bringing all-day shade. That means that different crops will need to be planted as the sun exposure changes.

For more information on Foodscapes Hawaii, visit foodscapeshawaii.com, email fran@foodscapeshawaii.com or call 375-8025.

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