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A Bespoke Organic Garden For L.A.'s Top Chefs



Beds of organic goodness at The Cook's Garden

The farm keeps getting closer to the table in the farm-to-table movement. Yes, every Los Angeles restaurant worth its weight in wormy compost relies on sustainable organic produce of local origin. But [The Cook's Garden](#), an urban farm that popped up last month in a vacant lot on Abbot Kinney in Venice, has customers practically nibbling straight off the vines.

Master Gardener Geri Miller, who launched the project June 1, first meets with chefs like Govind Armstrong at [Willie Jane](#) restaurant next door, to design an organic garden wish list. She then handles all the dirty work: planting in high-quality soil, irrigation, pest control, constant pruning — all the way to harvest once, twice or even six times a week. She has a chicken coop for eggs and a teaching garden for classes. Prices on a monthly basis are roughly comparable to shopping at Whole Foods or farmer's markets.

Miller and her team at [Home Grown Edible Landscapes](#) already tend restaurant, spa and cocktail gardens elsewhere in Los Angeles, including [mar'sel](#) restaurant at Terranea Resort in Palos Verdes and [Four Daughters Kitchen](#) in Manhattan Beach. This is the first location offering the service to both pros and home cooks.

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I wandered in recently and spotted Miller kneeling among the 33 raised redwood garden beds, each like an eight-by-four patch of Eden. Aaron Hernandez, a sous chef at Willie Jane, was looking for items to add to the restaurant's dinner menu.



Chefs from Willie Jane in the garden with Geri Miller and her husband Steve, right

"Wow, the Hansel and Gretels are amazing," Hernandez said, pointing at the tiny purple and white eggplants, a bonsai cousin of the larger vegetable. "These are almost impossible to find at the farmer's markets. I can't wait to use them."

A big advantage to bespoke gardening is the opportunity to harvest "baby" vegetables or to propagate seeds for rare ingredients. "One of my chefs wanted a lettuce called ice lettuce, a French heirloom lettuce he couldn't find in the market," Miller said. "I found seeds and we're growing it now." Likewise, Armstrong gets to use frilly mustard and sweeter baby collards at a time when they're unavailable elsewhere.

Miller earned her master gardening credentials at the University of California at Davis and worked for years as a garden educator for Los Angeles public schools. At The Cook's Garden, she uses a bio-intensive planting process to get over 200 plants in each bed that enables a very high production. Each bed is currently producing four to six pounds of lettuce each week, Miller's husband and business partner, Steven Miller, told me.

The garden has been an immediate success. The beds for home chefs are sold out. Each costs \$327 a month for 120-150 plants per garden plot. Every bed has a trellis and arch to maximize growing, along with stacking pots for herbs and strawberries.

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Lettuce ready for the menu at Willie Jane

On the commercial side (restaurants pay about \$100 more per month; spaces are still available), [Joe's Restaurant](#) and [Rustic Canyon](#) recently signed up, and the Millers plan to open a new Cook's Garden location in Culver City.

"We're aiming to be near high-minded kitchens in neighborhoods will

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ing to eat the best produce they can find," Geri Miller said. "We want to turn vacant lots into places where you can eat nutritiously and deliciously."

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