



By Steve Coomes
Photo by John Nation

Produce producers: Chef John Varanese picking baby yellow tomatoes at Clifton's Billy Goat Hill Community Garden.

It's All Elemental

JOHN VARANESE, CHEF-OWNER, VARANESE

Depending on where he's cooked, John Varanese has raised gardens large and small. At the Cardinal Club in Shelbyville several years ago, he worked a sizable patch of 1,000 square feet. But the all-consuming launch of his namesake eatery in Clifton several years ago forced him to hang up his hoe. This year he's returned to the dirt with a modest eight-by-four-foot raised bed at the Clifton Center, just blocks from his restaurant; over the winter he started seeds at home and transplanted them this spring.

"Yeah, it's downsized a little from what I'm used to, but I wanted to do something to get back to it," says Varanese, who's arranged to plant a larger garden in 2012 behind a nearby business. "For me, it really comes down to the satisfaction of putting in some hard work and getting something for it that you can enjoy and share."

This year's wet spring and hot summer have challenged his yellow teardrop tomatoes, sweet cherry tomatoes, basil and jalapeño peppers. "It's always a fight with Mother Nature," he says. "I planted some early-growth tomatoes, but they're the last to come on right now. The rains slowed down the basil because there was too much water, but now it's hot and dried out."

Varanese's garden is pesticide- and fertilizer-free, and his staff is researching how to maximize production within a small space next year by learning which plants grow beneath the canopies of taller, leafier varieties. "We saw where a guy was growing pepper plants below his tomato plants to conserve space and water, and we realized how smart that was," he says. "We like that challenge of making it better."