

more vegetable gardens

through a neighborhood veggie co-op.

"We're helping to feed each other and what better time than now?" Martinez said.

A new report by the National Gardening Association predicts a 19 percent increase in home gardening in 2009, based on spring seed sales data and a telephone survey. One-fifth of respondents said they planned to start a food garden this year and more than half said they already were gardening to save on groceries.

Community gardens nationwide are also seeing a surge of interest. The waiting list at the 312-plot Long Beach Community Garden has nearly quadrupled — and no one is leaving, said Lonnie Brundage, who runs the garden's membership list.

"They're growing for themselves, but you figure if they can use our community garden year-round they can save \$2,000 or \$3,000 or \$4,000 a year," she said. "It doesn't take a lot for it to add up."

Seed companies say this renaissance has rescued their vegetable business after years of drooping sales. Orders for vegetable seeds have skyrocketed, while orders for flowers are flat or down, said Richard Chamberlin, president of Harris Seeds in Rochester, N.Y.

Business there has increased 40 percent in the last year, with the most growth among vegetables such as peppers, tomatoes and kitchen herbs that can thrive in small urban plots or patio containers, he said. Harris Seeds recently had to reorder pepper and tomato seeds.

"I think if things were fine, you wouldn't see people doing this. They're just too busy," Chamberlin said. "Gardening for most Americans was a dirty word because it meant work and nobody wanted more work — but that's changed."

Harris Seed's Web site now gets 40,000 hits a day.

Among larger companies, Burpee saw a 20 percent spike in sales in the last year and started marketing a kit for first-time gardeners called "The Money Garden." It has sold 15,000 in about two months, said Ball.

A Web-based retailer called MasterGardening.com is selling similar packages, and Park Seed of Greenwood, S.C., is marketing a "Garden for Victory Seed Collection." Slogan: "Win the war in your own backyard against high supermarket prices and nonlocal produce!"

Cultivators with years of experience worry that home gardeners lured by promises of big savings will burn out when they see the amount of labor required. The average gardener spends nearly five hours a week grubbing in the dirt and often contends with failure early on, said Bruce Butterfield, a spokesman for The National Gardening Association.

"The one thing you don't factor into it is the cost of your time and your labor," he said.

"But even if it's just a couple of tomato plants in a pot, that's worth the price of admission."



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