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Behind the Scenes

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SUBSCRIBER CONTENT: Apr 12, 2009, 9:00pm PDT Updated: Apr 9, 2009, 1:00pm PDT

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Molbak's draws a crowd of recession gardeners who want to grapple with dirt and produce vegetables

At a recent seminar at Molbak's horticulture center in Woodinville, entitled "Planting Your Own Vegetable Garden," 300 people showed up. That's almost four times as many as show up for seminars typically, an indication that folks are serious about growing some of their own food this season to cut costs and further a healthy lifestyle.

Molbak's next seminar on edibles, on April 18, covers the topic of growing salad greens and herbs. That one is likely to draw at least as many people.

Gardening is big business. Many area P-patches have waiting lists. And many homeowners are turning lawns into kitchen gardens.

Molbak's Chief Operating Officer Julie Kouhia says vegetable seeds and edible starts are flying out the door. The company sold 2,000 packets of seeds at February's Northwest Flower and Garden Show. In Molbak's itself, veggie seed sales have been up 10 to 40 percent for the last five weeks. "Lettuce, spinach, tomato seeds are all selling. And seed potatoes sales are going nuts. Potatoes are flying out of here, " says Kouhia.

Also doing unusually well at Molbak's are potted starts of peas, a dozen or more varieties of lettuces, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. You can sing it. And if it's edible, it's selling.

"Lettuce sales alone are up 50 percent from last year," says Kouhia. "And we've recently sold 750 pots of basil." That's a lot in a short period of time.

Similar story at other garden outlets, like Flower World in Snohomish, where Ane Larsson says they deliberately "brought out more (edibles), anticipating the demand and we are selling more and getting many more inquiries this year as well."

Broccoli is doing very well at Flower World, as are all varieties of berry bushes, especially blueberries and raspberries. Berries can be expensive in grocery stores, but are easy to grow in gardens. Fruit trees are big sellers at Flower World, with apples and plums leading the way.

Molbak's is encouraging people to plant a little extra this spring for people less fortunate. Then

from May to October, they'll list drop-off points and dates on their website, and will transfer your produce to food banks.

Sounds of history

Some beautiful sounds are coming from a building saved from the wrecking ball a year ago, and said to be the oldest house of worship in downtown Seattle. The 100-year-old First United Methodist Church structure, with its red tiled dome and huge stained glass windows, was purchased in a \$32 million deal stitched together by Kevin Daniels, preservationist and president of Daniels Development, a sister company of Nitze-Stagen. It is now known as Daniels Recital Hall.

"It started construction in 1906 and finished construction between 1908 and 1910," says Daniels. "It was the first Byzantine-style church in America," he says. "We've recorded it with the National Trust (for Historic Preservation, of which Daniels is a member) and eventually we'll get credit," he says.

Now its walls are being restored to their former glory and, inside, its giant pipe organ, some 32 feet tall, with 4,000 pipes and 49 stops, is being heard again in monthly lunchtime concerts, free to the public.

Playing this instrument is artist-in-residence Mark Andersen, a nationally known organist who also owns International Artists, a recording and talent agency based in New York City. Andersen has experience running concerts in New York, Paris and London and has a TV program called "Crescendo" on a Time Warner station in New York and on the public access channel in our area.

He says this particular organ, an American classic style, is designed to be flexible enough to play all styles of music and is especially suited for playing big French classics and music from the era of Beethoven. On April 23, a concert is scheduled to feature the music of the baroque, especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach.

"It's very awe inspiring," says Andersen, of the organ. "The building has one of the finest acoustics (halls) in the city of Seattle. It's a wonderful thing to have an instrument like that on which to perform."

The March concert was heard by almost 500 people. When the balconies are redone, possibly in May, the capacity will enlarge to 1,200. In the summer, Andersen says they will increase the schedule to two concerts a month, every second and fourth Thursday.

Maybe somewhere in the hall, during the concerts, the ghost of Arthur Denny, one of Seattle's founders, whom Daniels says was the first member of the congregation, will hear the grand sounds and approve.

Coffee talk

Something is brewing at Alaska Airlines. A branding campaign launched this week, including a couple of amusing TV spots. The new "tag line" is "North of Expected" — a revitalizing of the brand of this hometown airline, known for its service. They spent a fortune on these three words, which you can expect to see around for a long time — not a flash in the pan, as one Alaska Airlines executive told me. With the creative help of Wongdoody, they literally blew through hundreds of

tag lines in the last year, watering them down to eight, and then narrowing those through opinions of employees and most frequent flyers. They plan to stick with it and build on it. For now, it'll be on radio too and in print, on billboards and buses. And in Portland they've wrapped a couple of trains as well. Check it out on the new website www.northofexpected.com.

By now Charles Simonyi should be back on Earth, after the billionaire software mogul's second trip to the International Space Station. But a few days before that, Susan Hutchison, who heads Simonyi's foundation, was at the airport in Tucson waiting for her flight when her cell phone rang. "It was an odd number but I answered it anyway," she says. Turned out to be Simonyi calling from space. He told her he had just finished his work for the day and was just floating around, with time to call. "The connection was perfect, as if he were next door," she says. Since the airport was full of students on spring break, her urge was to tell them all to come over to hear Simonyi in space. "But I thought twice about it. I knew they and their parents could think I was from outer space," she says.

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