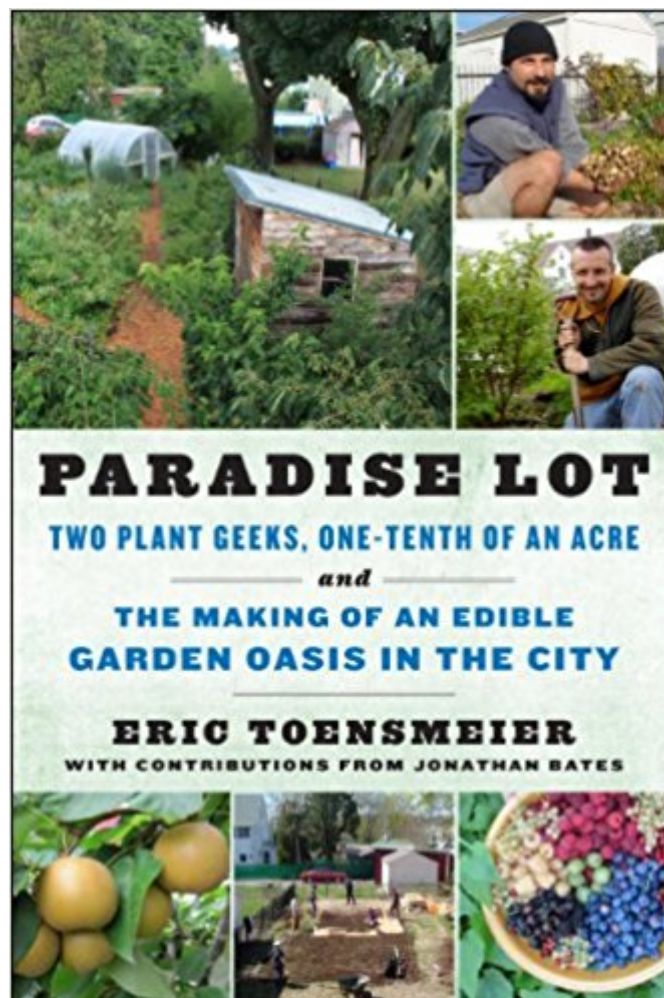




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# Paradise Lot: Two Plant Geeks, One-Tenth Of An Acre, And The Making Of An Edible Garden Oasis In The City



## Synopsis

When Eric Toensmeier and Jonathan Bates moved into a duplex in a run-down part of Holyoke, Massachusetts, the tenth-of-an-acre lot was barren ground and bad soil, peppered with broken pieces of concrete, asphalt, and brick. The two friends got to work designing what would become not just another urban farm, but a "permaculture paradise" replete with perennial broccoli, paw paws, bananas, and moringa—all told, more than two hundred low-maintenance edible plants in an innovative food forest on a small city lot. The garden—intended to function like a natural ecosystem with the plants themselves providing most of the garden's needs for fertility, pest control, and weed suppression—also features an edible water garden, a year-round unheated greenhouse, tropical crops, urban poultry, and even silkworms. In telling the story of Paradise Lot, Toensmeier explains the principles and practices of permaculture, the choice of exotic and unusual food plants, the techniques of design and cultivation, and, of course, the adventures, mistakes, and do-overs in the process. Packed full of detailed, useful information about designing a highly productive permaculture garden, Paradise Lot is also a funny and charming story of two single guys, both plant nerds, with a wild plan: to realize the garden of their dreams and meet women to share it with. Amazingly, on both counts, they succeed.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With their shared passion for plants and a commitment to creating as self-sustaining a garden as possible on a minuscule lot in a small New England city cursed with a terrible climate and even

worse soil, Toensmeier and Bates set about converting their urban backyard into a permaculture paradise. Informed by his work on a seminal, two-volume encyclopedia devoted to the concept of forest gardening, Toensmeier transformed the infertile and debris-laden property behind the duplex he shared with Bates into a natural ecosystem teeming with edible plants. As the authors' postage-stamp-size front yard morphed into a lush, tropical showcase that astounded their Massachusetts community, the backyard incorporated all the components necessary to produce fresh fruits and vegetables year-round using cold-hardy, mostly native plants that would ideally require a minimum amount of work for a maximum output. As a memoir of a purposeful life, Toensmeier's work is engaging, honest, and natural. As a directive to other gardeners eager to establish natural ecosystems in unlikely settings, his work is instructive, illuminating, and inspirational. --Carol Haggas

**Publishers Weekly**-In this charming, true-life tale of urban regeneration and the birth of a forest garden movement, Toensmeier, famous among permaculture enthusiasts for his *Perennial Vegetables* and as coauthor of *Edible Forest Gardens*, tells the story behind the Holyoke, Mass., garden featured as a test case in the latter, which, in the course of eight years, he and Bates transformed from a bare backyard wasteland into a flourishing, edible Eden. In true permaculture fashion, the book follows not only the progression of the garden but also its influence on and relations with its creators' lives—including a surprisingly Austen-like romantic element—their neighborhood, and the larger permaculture and forest gardening community. Bates, whose nursery business, Food Forest Farm, is an offshoot of this garden, contributes philosophical and personal essays interspersed throughout the narrative. Fans of Toensmeier and Bates's work will be thrilled to read the details of their experiments with polycultures, their problems with and solutions for pests and overly aggressive plants, and their idiosyncratic plant choices. Adventurous readers with conventional gardens and lawns may be inspired to venture into the more integrated, evolutionary approach that this book so vividly and appealingly portrays.

**Booklist**-With their shared passion for plants and a commitment to creating as self-sustaining a garden as possible on a minuscule lot in a small New England city cursed with a terrible climate and even worse soil, Toensmeier and Bates set about converting their urban backyard into a permaculture paradise. Informed by his work on a seminal, two-volume encyclopedia devoted to the concept of forest gardening, Toensmeier transformed the infertile and debris-laden property behind the duplex he shared with Bates into a natural ecosystem teeming with edible plants. As the authors' postage-stamp-size front yard morphed into a lush, tropical

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**Kirkus Reviews**-The front yard was a short, steep slope of asphalt with a tiny strip of sterile gravel and subsoil," write Toensmeier and Bates, with a "backyard that looked like a moonscape, sparsely populated with tufts of crabgrass." It was the perfect place to launch their experiment: Could two men with horticultural experience and a love of nature turn a typical compact backyard into a garden full of lush plants and edible food? The authors chronicle their 10-plus years of trials and experiments, as they transformed their "moonscape" into a permaculture of "trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous perennials" that produced food at every level. By analyzing their soil and plotting the movement of shade and sun for a year, the authors discovered the prime locations to build a greenhouse and tool shed. They knew where to plant trees and perennials so that they could bring their site to life, and they developed a deeper kinship with the space and with each other. Along the journey, the authors present ideas like sheet mulching, which can transform a lawn into a useful garden plot capable of growing tomatoes and sweet corn in the first year. They also share their thoughts on the plants that can become noxious weeds despite their culinary uses. Toensmeier and Bates discuss both their triumphs and their defeats, as they experimented with chickens, nitrogen fixers, ground covers, numerous kinds of berry bushes and water plants. Although not a how-to guide, the authors give readers plenty of choices and ideas to think about when deciding whether to embark on this kind of gardening.

**ForeWord Reviews**-  
"Urban agriculture is becoming a hot topic in sustainable farming circles as more people become interested in organic foods, healthy eating choices, and environmental topics. Given population densities in some areas, urban agriculture might seem like an oxymoron to some, but with careful planning and a sense of adventure, even a tiny plot of land can yield a bumper crop. Longtime friends Eric Toensmeier and Jonathan Bates certainly demonstrate the type of strategy and passion required for the effort. In their charming, insightful description of their tiny urban garden in Holyoke, Massachusetts, the two cover twelve years of growing, from their initial reaction to seeing the compacted, gravel-edged soil, to the moment when they have to consider the long-term future of their growing families, which likely means leaving their garden paradise. Along with relaying various missteps and challenges, Toensmeier (with occasional contributions from Bates) layers together their experiences with natural pesticide controls, wild

mushroom foraging, city regulations, berry plants, forest gardens, chickens, having girlfriends move in, trellis systems, and an array of other topics. Dividing the garden's history into four sections—sleep, creep, leap, and reap—Toensmeier creates a combination of personal memoir and permaculture guide. Filled with insight, but not too technical, he strikes an artful balance between giving useful detail and geeking out on gardening nuances. Although readers who want to learn more about compost and chicken coops may get the most out of their journey, *Paradise Lot* will still be a delight for someone who can't even grow a houseplant. As Toensmeier and Bates demonstrate, it doesn't take twenty acres to start a garden filled with nourishing vegetables and gorgeous flowers; it just takes some vision, especially if the potential garden is a scruffy urban lot. Part gardening guide, part personal story, the book is ultimately a call to action, with the pair proclaiming that it doesn't matter what a patch of land looks like, as long as someone is willing to explore its potential. "We made our little paradise here," Toensmeier writes. "Imagine what would happen if we as a species paid similar attention to all the degraded and abandoned lands of the world." Library Journal-STARRED REVIEW "Part handbook, part memoir, this book details the evolution of a permaculture garden on an urban lot in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Having spent years describing permaculture gardens in a theoretical manner, Toensmeier (Perennial Vegetables) and his friend Bates (owner, Food Forest Farm Permaculture Nursery) put these theories into practice when they bought and moved into a duplex situated on a 1/10 acre rundown lot. Nearly a decade later, the lot is unrecognizable—a tropical paradise in the front and a wealth of more than 200 edible plants in the back. Toensmeier clearly explains the processes—needless to say, nothing changed overnight—that achieved this near-miracle. VERDICT: The authors' prose pulls the reader into their lives, sparking a desire to see the result and try this kind of gardening. The appendixes are filled with useful information for readers who may be intrigued enough to create their own paradise. All readers interested in urban renewal or environmental issues will welcome this book." "Although many of us dream of creating our ideal urban homestead from scratch, the reality is far less pristine: toxic soil, rampant exotic species, outdated codes, and all the other grit of city life. *Paradise Lot* is a practical manual, based on hard-won lessons, for working positively with the realities of our cities to create a sustainable, peaceful, and abundant oasis in the urban jungle. In this vivid and engaging work, Eric Toensmeier entices us with his journey as an example, explaining what to do, and what mistakes to avoid, to develop our own versions of an edible urban paradise."—Toby Hemenway, author of *Gaia's Garden* "Our connection to place defines us as gardeners and farmers just as much as the plants we choose to

grow. The integration of perennial plantings, microclimate, and natural beauty comes about by listening to the land. What a delight to then have one of America's preeminent permaculture teachers share his personal story with both place and partner. Sometimes that meaningful insight we need in shaping our own garden path comes from hearing of the successes and foibles other gardeners found on their path. The gift Eric Toensmeier and Jonathan Bates offer in *Paradise Lot* is their heart for all things green.

—Michael Phillips, author of *The Holistic Orchard* and *The Apple Grower*

“*Paradise Lot* is a magnificent story about how two young broke landless ‘plant geeks’ transform an urban lot into a permaculture heaven capable of producing all their fruit and vegetables as well as attracting suitable mates. The book is a groundbreaking work on temperate-climate permaculture as well as a personal saga, as the author’s discovery and discussion of the differences between theory and practice goes beyond anything in the current permaculture literature. The book has a lot of information on growing and using various perennial food plants and, of particular value, it includes specific accounts of what didn’t work and why as well as what did. *Paradise Lot* should be particularly useful to those with small lots or poor or abused soil. Much writing in permaculture is for people with plenty of land and money. This is permaculture for the rest of us. Best of all, *Paradise Lot* is fun to read. It overflows with love of plants, love of land, love of adventuring on the edge of knowledge, and love of living. It’s hard to put down. I read it in two large gulps.”

—Carol Deppe, author of *The Resilient Gardener* and *Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties*

“*Paradise Lot* is a timeless classic of urban permaculture in action that clearly shows design evolution over time. This is a true model of the change the world needs.”

—Geoff Lawton, founder of Permaculture Research Institute and creator of *Greening the Desert*

“Just when I figured I had heard it all in growing food, comes a book that makes me realize I don’t know the half of it. *Paradise Lot* is an amazing, almost unbelievable account of how to grow some 150–200 food- and nitrogen-producing plants on a measly one-tenth of an acre, providing food year round in a cold climate. The authors reveal in great detail how they do this, starting with poor urban backyard soil and using totally organic and permaculture methods. They have raised 400 pounds of perennial fruits and vegetables in addition to many annual vegetables per year in this tiny garden. With more time, knowledge, and labor, they are sure they can produce appreciably more. If you want your imagination challenged and intrigued, this is the book for you. As the authors say, here is proof positive that with proper knowledge and will there is no such thing as food scarcity.”

—Gene Logsdon, author of *A Sanctuary of Trees* and *Small-Scale*

Grain Raising – “Eric has a leisurely, entertaining, and personable way of revealing how his own edible forest garden evolved. Along the way, the reader will learn design guidelines that can be used in virtually any climate. A good read full of insight and science.” – Robert Kourik, author of *Designing and Maintaining Your Edible Landscape Naturally* – “Paradise Lot is an inspiring book that encourages exploration of the possibilities of growing edibles in any and every yard, no matter how small. And not only tomatoes or apples, but all sorts of edibles from hog peanuts (taste much better than their name) to pawpaws to mints to jostaberry. Join Eric Toensmeier and his friend Jonathan Bates on their ten-plus-year journey in creating a garden of eatables in a very small city lot. I can’t wait for the sequel!” – Lee Reich, PhD, author of *Grow Fruit Naturally*, *The Pruning Book*, and *Landscaping with Fruit*

Ever since my dream girl and I got married and bought our first house, I couldn’t wait to work in the yard and garden. Been through 4 houses now (I hope my last!) and this book made me realize just how I’ve been doing it ALL WRONG. In my current home I hired a “Professional landscape designer” (term used loosely as anyone can call themselves such) to help me with the frame work while I filled in areas later. I wound up getting what 90% of landscapers suggest: Tons of garbage Asian plants that are easy to care for but completely unproductive and actually damage the environment by invading natural woods nearby. My Japanese Privet (*Ligustrum*), Laurel, and burning bush achieve nothing. I am now considering ripping out about 50 burning bushes that form a hedge and replace with native blueberry. I could have had many pounds of blueberries (which I LOVE) all this time. What was I thinking! I’m slowly replacing other hedges with native plums, (also a great hedge that keeps kids out) and Elderberry and have begun slowly planting/replacing. While the author took things to the extreme - to develop a self-contained eco-system - we can all learn from the trails (garden paths) they blazed (mulched). Great read. But be forewarned - You will want to spit on your backyard and tear everything out when you realize what you’ve been doing all wrong!

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. We are just beginning our permaculture journey on a half acre in Omaha, Nebraska. Reading about Paradise Lot provided lots of ideas for what we will try. The book is very readable and both authors bring their experiences to the pages in different ways. Eric writes more about the methodology, while Jonathan tells more about the personal/emotional experience. At least, this was my perception of their styles. Overall, a very enjoyable book that is pragmatic and entertaining!

Well-written, fact-laden, useful and truly applicable for the gardener who wants to do more than just garden. This book gives you the blueprint needed to take your commitment to gardening and apply it to your moral yearning to make the world a better place through your gardening!! Beyond the organic, biointensive, four-season and/or permaculture methods, this book allows you to understand how you can combine all of these methods while creating a lasting legacy that will survive and allow the generations that follow to thrive as a result of your planning and planting. I was so enchanted that I immediately got on the website and purchased one of every plant that they had available for Zone 6. I look forward to working with them in the future to bring an Intensive Hands-On Workshop to our area here in Ohio and have already signed on for an on-site consult! Every gardener dreams of leaving an edible legacy; this book explains exactly how to do that! Thank you Jonathan and Eric [and Meg and Marikler, too!]; may Great Spirit keep you safe on your journey!

I loved Paradise Lot. It took me 3 days to read because I was reading so fast. I'm going to reread it again because it was so good. Love the stories in it. Very entertaining to read yet so much information at the same time that I need to go back with a pen and paper and take notes. Although they live on the East Coast with much colder weather and I live in San Diego, I feel that the book still helped me a great deal. I'm now even more inspired to work on my own back yard and food forest. I wish they would move to a new lot, start over and journal that garden as well! I'd buy that book. I'm probably going to by their other 2 volume set about food forests. They explained about how they put that together and it seems like an encyclopedia of information that is very much worth having. I'm sad that I'm not close to where they live. It would be interesting to take a tour after learning so much about the effort put forth in designing it all these years. I'd recommend this to anyone who wants to create an edible yard. Very helpful.

I liked the conversational style of it. It felt almost like you were having a conversation with them about it (via reading, of course). You could really feel their passion, concerns and hopes come through the text. It was nice to get fed a lot of information in a way that wasn't quite so sterile. I also liked that they shared so many ideas of possible plants, possible combinations, what worked for them and what didn't for the northern regions/temperate climates. While they are quick to remind the reader that it will vary from site to site, I think that it is a good reference for a jumping off point. I can already see that I will have to go back through and take notes, since I did not do it on the first pass. I think this book would benefit more than just urban lots, though. Hopefully it doesn't get pigeon-holed



because of the title. Two thumbs up from me.

This was a completely new topic for me. I found a recommendation for the book on a blog that I like and ordered it. I'm actually at a really crazy, busy place right now and I still made the time to read this book. It was a very enjoyable read and I found it inspiring. I like how the authors approached the original design of their garden. I like their thoughtful, unhurried, low-maintenance approach. It makes gardening seem so much more feasible. We were planning on adding some shrubs to 'fence' in our front yard. Now I am intrigued by the thought of using something that is actually edible. Or using shrubbery that could be used as a trellis for something edible. I've already lent my book out to one person and a second is on my wait list.

Was hoping for way more useable info instead of an inspiration story. My mistake?

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