

# How to start backyard farming

## An exclusive expert guide



### JULIE PIERRE'S IDEA WAS SIMPLE, BUT BRILLIANT.

Find a few neighbors with empty backyards, and start growing food. Give each homeowner fresh produce, in exchange for the use of their space. Sell the rest to people who are passionate about local food.

It's community-supported agriculture, with a twist: The farm is in suburban backyards.

Pierre established Our Yards Farm in the spring of 2015, and she has since turned backyard farming into a booming business. She has been featured in several news stories and had a starring role in *YardFarmers*, a documentary series that follows six young Americans who move home with their parents to become yardfarmers.

One veggie at a time, she is changing the way Americans think about where food comes from, who grows it, and how it gets to our tables.

**Alfrea sat down with Pierre to talk about how she got started backyard farming. Here's her exclusive expert guide.**



#### 1. Find a backyard to farm – it's not as hard as you think

Pierre was surprised to discover how many people were interested in sharing their land and supporting her project.

"The first year I made a little website, and I just put it out on social media and said: 'Hey everybody, I'm starting a farm, I'm looking for land!'" Local newspapers wrote stories, and news circulated around the community through a few moms' groups on Facebook.

"People started talking, and it was just shared. A lot of it was just word of mouth."

Pierre put out the word in October, and by March she had narrowed it down to 10 big, sunny spaces.

#### 2. Partner with homeowners who share your vision

Instead of approaching people and asking if she could farm on their property, Pierre waited for people to volunteer their backyards. She was looking for kindred spirits who understood the concept of an urban, backyard CSA.

"You might be surprised to find that there's someone in your community who is going to be on the same page as you, and they're going to be excited," Pierre said. "It really is a two-way relationship. I'm getting your lawn, but in exchange you're getting food, but a lot more, too. They want their kids to understand where food comes from, for example."

In one case, a homeowner who shares land with Our Yards Farm works from home. When Pierre comes to weed the plot, he comes out to visit, munches a cherry tomato and asks how it's going.

"It's a two-way street, and we're both benefitting," she said. "They want this experience, too. 'People are dying for community connection.'"

#### 3. Evaluate the growing space

Pierre said assessing the potential garden space is the most important part of getting started. Consider:

- Is it large enough?
- Is it sunny enough?
- Is it close to other gardens you're managing?

"If it's an extra 20 minutes away, and I'm there two or three times a week, that adds up," Pierre said.

#### 4. Have a heart-to-heart about garden aesthetics

When she started out, Pierre tried to make her gardens beautiful so they wouldn't draw criticism.

She quickly learned that a working farm doesn't look like a photo shoot in *Better Homes and Gardens*. She is concerned with how much food a garden is producing – not how it looks.

“The aesthetics of the growing space are probably one of the most important things, because it’s so visible,” Pierre said. “The homeowner might not really care about the veggies, they may sign up just because they don’t want to mow the lawn.”

“It’s important to talk to each other, make sure you understand each other, make sure that you’re on the same page,” she said.

“If they currently have a lawn company spraying pesticides, it might be a more difficult relationship, because they might be used to a certain aesthetic, and they might not understand why they have to stop using herbicides,” Pierre said.

“I hope one day we get back to the place where the veggie [garden] aesthetic is normal again, but that’s not where we are,” she said. “I was looking to find people who wanted me to be there.”

## 5. Make the deal

Pierre operates a backyard CSA, so the people who lend their land get a discount commensurate with the size of the space.

“The concept is that in exchange for land, you get a share in the CSA,” she said. “Depending on the size of the space, you either get a full share or a half share, or, if it’s a really small space, you get a percentage off.”

Other backyard farmers use a different model. For example, Kelowna, B.C.-based urban farmer Chris Stone of [Green City Acres](#) gives homeowners a basket of food during the growing season, but sells the rest of his produce to restaurants and at farmers markets.

## 6. Sign a contract

Pierre signs an official contract with homeowners, a formal way to lay out expectations and ensure that everyone is on the same page. In it, she includes:

- when she will be in the garden or on the property
- how she will access water, and who will pay for it
- a guarantee that chemicals haven’t been used on the property for three years
- a promise not to use chemicals on the property while the farm is in operation.

Pierre currently signs one-year contracts with homeowners, but after two people moved mid-way through the season, she is considering multi-year contracts in the future.

“I’m putting in a lot of work to get the land prepped and ready, building up the soil with compost, getting the soil tested, amending it, cover cropping it,” she says. “If I’m going to be doing all this work, finding people who aren’t going to move and also longer term contracts, those are possibilities.”

## 7. Get started! It could change your life.

We asked Pierre how Our Yards Farm has changed her.

“It has changed everything,” she said. “It has affected every aspect of my life. When I was younger, I always wanted to do something that would have a positive impact. I could never pinpoint it, I just wanted to do good.”

“I feel like I’ve found my place, and my thing, where I can contribute positively to my community, and it combines so many aspects of things I’m interested in: being active, eating well, cooking.”

She still struggles sometimes, but most of the time she loves what she does.

“My community has welcomed me, supported me. Really, I couldn’t exist without having a community of people behind me.”

## If you’re thinking of getting started in backyard farming, Pierre’s advice is simple.

“I would say, just do it. People are intimidated by gardening. We’re somewhat disconnected, because so few of us grew up with gardens in our backyards.

“But the plants want to grow, they’re meant to grow, they’re meant to produce fruits and veggies. We have our failures - that’s inevitable - but you’re going to have success, too.

“Get out there and start doing it. That’s the only way.”