



# Re-Purposing with a Purpose



All her life Julie Smith has looked at things differently. What others see as items for the trash heap, Julie sees as things waiting for a new life. She brings that same eye for “re-purposing” to her efforts as a third year gardener with WISEWOMAN. While just doing small container gardening with herbs before she began with WISEWOMAN, Julie has gardened on and off since she was very young. “My grandmother was an herbalist and my dad was great with vegetables. Gardening is kind of family thing.”

The first year meant clearing a section of woods at her home in Otsego County. “We just trimmed enough branches to let good light in.” said Julie. Since then gardens have sprouted up around her property using the most unlikely materials. There are potato bins made from chicken wire and snow skis, a canoe that became a combination sandbox and garden for her small grandchildren, skis made into garden benches and chairs, and a baby crib that became a trellis for her roses and a gate for the garden. Old ladders also trellis vine vegetables, roof shingles create a garden walkway, and mason jars become solar lights. “I tell people don’t go to the store and buy, look at what you have around you and think how can I reuse that?”

At the end of her second year with WISEWOMAN, Julie got a hoophouse. The raised beds inside the hoophouse are recycled risers from Kmart and the dirt to fill them comes from the chicken’s scratch pile. Julie is also a frequent visitor to the city’s nearby compost pile where she carefully harvests perennial flowers to dry for seed.

Julie is also experimenting with plenty of companion gardening with veggies and herbs. “Rosemary near cucumbers makes them more tasty and juicy. Or help your tomatoes with some spearmint planted close by. When I see an herb I also see hand lotion or soap.”

This past year Julie sold her produce and products online and to friends and family. “I was even selling my herbs at a girlfriend’s resale shop. Next year my husband’s going to build me a roadside stand.” Her husband works in construction and is always bringing home “stuff” to challenge Julie’s creative eye for repurposing in the garden.

Next year’s plans also include a greenhouse made of recycled windows, clearing more woods for more gardens and being able to offer classes to other WISEWOMAN and community members on repurposing. “The gardening program has taught me that you don’t have to have acres to make a living and still have something for yourself. It has given me so many different ideas for expanding my garden and how to make use of a small space.”

What’s one piece of advice she would offer other WISEWOMAN gardeners? “Keep a journal. It lets you know what’s worked from year to year. Otherwise, we tend to forget.”

“A few years ago I was diagnosed with heart problems. Gardening has definitely made me healthier. The connection I feel to everything when I garden helps me get up in the morning.”