

The New Face of Gardening

Once upon a time the plantings around a house were all about appearances. How times have changed! Now, home gardening is still about beauty but it also incorporates a point of view. The popularity of native plants expresses our interest in the history of the place we call home. We look at a plant and ask where it came from, will it be happy here, does it have the attributes that will make it valuable to birds, bees, and butterflies we want to welcome.

With spring, which has been flirting with us since December, about to become the season we are officially occupying, our efforts turn to the rejuvenating and improving of our small bit of the community. As a sure sign of spring, three of the lawns in my neighborhood are sporting raised beds, probably already planted with early cold weather favorites.

One of the many advantages of raised beds is that you can sow seeds earlier, knowing that in the event of a sudden cold snap, you can toss an old quilt over them. In fact, customized "store-bought" beds can be equipped not only with made to fit covers but liners as well. The liners are important if you have raised beds on a driveway or patio. My patio still has the stains incurred when dozens of plants for the Master Gardener Plant Extravaganza sat there through a long hot summer. Why must we learn everything the hard way? By using a liner the run-off from the potting soil will stay in the bed. Further attachments to make the job more efficient include 'corners' for joining boards and self-watering components.

If you have concerns about your plants overheating in plastic containers, there is now the option of growing your vegetables in porous grow bags. According to the Gardeners Supply Company these bright colorful bags are made of "double-layer polypropylene that breathes, preventing heat build-up and providing good drainage and aeration."

Such fun, these bags. There is a jumbo sized one for growing potatoes. I remember the surprise years ago of lifting a forkful of roots from the row of potato plants and finding potatoes dangling like pearls from a necklace. If you worry about critters, rot, and such, bags will provide a sure harvest. Not just the bags are available, but seed potatoes as well in all your favorite potato colors.

How interesting that a gardening method developed to fill a need for a compact growing area aided by a shed full of odds and ends, like boards too good to throw away, has become a best-selling method for small gardens and apartment balconies. Whether grown to promote health of the budget or the body and whether purchased on line or by virtue of D-I-Y, raised beds are here to stay.

These new methods reflect an increased regard for the environment. Even seed catalogs are featuring clever ways of insuring success by offering specialized growing pots, lights, soils, and advice. However the casual approach is not overlooked.

If you have little children or grandchildren, you know they want to put a real seed into real dirt and have a real flower right away. Memory reminds me that marigolds and zinnias were invented for children. Often zinnias will germinate in ten days, their growth is rapid and the colors screamingly vivid. They love to be planted where they will bloom, letting small gardeners choose the sunny spots.

Marigolds are even quicker to show that emerging lacy green and unlike more select seeds the packets have plenty to allow for spills. Marigolds are prized by vegetable growers who trust them to attract the good bugs and repel the bad. Other seeds to sow directly into your garden are those of nasturtium, cosmos, calendula, larkspur, morning glory and sunflowers. Not all sunflowers (*Helianthus*) tower: some varieties grow only four or five feet tall, manageable for small children.

Children may be coaxed to eat, or even cook, the things they have helped grow. Pulling on a ferny top and having a carrot pop out is an experience that may spur a child to eat vegetables. It may be even more fun if the carrot is yellow rather than the expected orange. And then there are yellow watermelons, neon colored Swiss chard, purple green beans, and white beets, offering lots of surprises.