

Having a Frugal Green Thumb - Grow More with Less

By Laura Kasdorf, Chippewa Valley Master Gardener Volunteer

It's Spring! We've got the planting bug and are more than ready to start enjoying our too-short Wisconsin growing season by stocking up on plants and gardening supplies. Your best, first stop is at your local greenhouse where the gardening professionals really know what they are doing and do it well. If, like me, your eyes are bigger than your shopping cart and your gardening budget, the foray into the wonderland of the garden center can be a challenge. Here are some ideas to help you make good choices to stretch your shopping dollars:

Start plants from seed. The process can be intimidating, but there are resources to guide you through it. Your county extension office, YouTube, workshops, books, garden center staff, and experienced gardeners in your circle of friends and family can provide you with the knowhow and confidence to start at least a few of the things you want to grow from seed.

Buy small plants. Pick up your favorite ornamentals, herbs, and vegetables early and plan to repot at least once before your plants go out to the yard or garden plot; buying plants in four or six packs costs considerably less than buying the same number of plants at a more mature size. You can repot the tiny plants at home and nurture them indoors or in a sheltered place until they are big enough and weather allows them to go all the way out to the garden.

Purchase plants that are easily turned into more plants. Coleus and basil are just two examples of plants that can easily be turned into multiple plants by rooting cuttings in a vase of water and then potting the cutting after it has developed a good root system. The parent plant will sprout new growth after you have cut some of the main stems, and if done early in the season, you will be able to add the starts to your garden by the time danger of frost is gone.

Divide perennials. Not only can dividing increase the number of plants in your landscape, it can also provide you with filler for your pots and window boxes. Hostas are great for this. Other easy and attractive options are cranesbill geranium, golden creeping Jenny, lamium, bergenia, sedums and even small shrubs. Perennials used in this way can be dug back into a garden plot before the freeze to overwinter and use again next year.

Send your houseplants outdoors for the summer. When warm weather comes to stay, pair houseplants, such as spider plant, tradescantia, and begonias, with flowering annuals for beautiful container plantings. Then take them back indoors at the end of the season.

Overwinter annuals for a repeat performance. Geraniums are especially good at surviving the winter indoors, either by going into dormancy or by being placed in a sunny location and continually watering as a houseplant. More details for either method can be found online. Coleus and begonias may also be good candidates for overwintering. If you have the room and the patience, give those and others a chance to hang in there until next year when they can go outside again.

Save seeds. Seeds of many non-hybrid, heirloom plants can be saved and stored for sowing in subsequent years. Or if plants seed themselves, let them grow where they fall or transplant their volunteer seedlings to other locations in your garden where they might thrive. Brown-eyed Susan, Grandpa Ott morning glory, and Husker Red penstemon are a few garden plants that readily come back year to year from seed. Selective deadheading can control reseederers if they are a little too zealous at creating new plants. Heirloom vegetable seeds can also be saved for next year's crop. Some saving is as easy as popping open a pod to retrieve the beans inside; others, like tomatoes, take a bit more effort, but with a minimum of instruction from the above-listed resources, saving their seeds is completely doable.

Go with the sure things. It is very tempting to want to try every new and exotic plant that appears for sale, but resist unless you know that it has a good chance of surviving more than one season. If you haven't seen a plant before, it might be because it is not meant to be here. Local greenhouses are conscientious about offering plants that are suitable for our growing zone. Big box pop up garden centers, not so much. Their distributors are likely providing plants to stores in a region that crosses a spectrum of climates. Read the plant's tag, look up its growing requirements, and then decide if you want to invest in a plant that may or may not thrive in your garden.

Go native. Some of the best bets for your garden are native plants. Most garden centers have dedicated sections of native perennials, and the above-mentioned resources can help you identify plants suited to our Wisconsin climate. In addition to being hardy, native plants have the added value of attracting a diverse variety of butterflies, bees, and birds to your backyard.

Avoid gimmicks and gadgets. There are no magic tricks for eliminating garden chores, so don't waste your gardening dollars on items that make those promises. Gardening is fun, but there is a little effort involved. For a successful garden, stick with elbow grease and time-tested tools rather than falling for the newest As-Seen-On-TV offer, even if you can "act now and get a second one free".

Treat yourself. Finally, after you have demonstrated frugality and pinched a few pennies, go ahead and splurge on a new flower pot, birdbath, perennial variety, showy annual, or whatever your heart desires. You've earned it!