



the
TROPICAL GARDEN
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Bursts of Springtime
Blossoms at Fairchild



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Gardening on the cheap offers great rewards. By using items from around the house, recycling trash or creatively repurposing, the frugal gardener can save money, reduce garbage and train the brain to think in imaginative and novel ways.

The Frugal Gardener

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Plants for free—or nearly free

Plant acquisition is a logical place to begin gardening. I normally avoid the “big box” stores for plants. However, some of their less-beautiful specimens can be found on sale for a few dollars and easily nursed back to health. It seems to me that many of those poor plants’ problems arise because they were placed in an area of the store to appeal to shoppers, rather than one that meets their horticultural needs. Many of the plants are mislabeled or not labeled at all. Many are sunburned, and should never have been placed in full

sun; or the opposite may be true, with full-sun lovers being deprived of light. Many of these plants can be saved with proper care. I’ve even heard of some people getting these soon-to-be discards for free. You will need to ascertain whether the plant can be saved by identifying it, looking it up on your smartphone while at the store (saves a trip home) to determine how much light, water and general care it needs and judging whether the store is meeting the individual’s requirements. If the plant seems to be suffering from only a lack of proper care, you might be able to save it by reversing the situation.

Another way to find inexpensive plants is to shop after major “plant” holidays are over. You’ll find many leftover gift plants at bargain prices (think poinsettias after Christmas). Also, look for discards at nurseries. These plants may be healthy, but not quite perfect enough to appeal to the casual buyer. Landscapers and other gardeners also throw away plants, simply because they may just have too many of one kind. Find these through word of mouth and by keeping an eye out for piles of greenery at the curb.



A discarded potted plant holder gets a second life as a seed starter.

Grow your own

Propagating from cuttings is another satisfying way to get cheap or free plants. It's very rewarding to behold a flourishing plant that you have grown from a tiny, withered cutting; I have a stunning purple *Solenostemon* (formerly *Coleus*) grown from a cutting found in the trash. Cut a four-to-six-inch piece off the tip of your plant, remove any leaves near the bottom, as well as any flowers or fruit (these draw energy the cutting needs to root), and place into a small pot of perlite (potting soil or water can also work). Perlite is heat-expanded pebbles of volcanic rock. It holds some moisture, but not enough to encourage rot. The open, airy spaces among the perlite pieces allow roots to penetrate more easily than dense soil. Before placing a cutting in perlite, you may also try dipping the cut end into rootone, a plant hormone that encourages roots to grow. Keep the perlite moist, as the cutting doesn't yet have a root system to absorb water.

Of course, nature loves to throw exceptions at us; many plants cannot be propagated by cuttings this way. Monocots like grasses, bananas, bamboos and palms generally work differently, although some monocots can be propagated by division or grown the old-fashioned way, from seed. At any rate, if the parent plant isn't yours, always get permission before taking cuttings!

Growing from seed is a more time-consuming option. Vegetables usually taste bitter after flowering, but let a few of your plants go to flower and produce seeds that you can harvest for use next season, or to give away. Collecting seeds from ornamental annuals is a good strategy to avoid having to buy a replacement plant. Some seeds need to be soaked before planting, while others need to be sown—scattered on the soil surface. There are as many nuances to the art and science of propagation as there are species of plants, so it's best to consult a source specific to your species. Then you can research more advanced techniques like air layering, grafting and micropropagation.

Newspaper

Aside from reading its gardening columns, what good can a newspaper do for your garden? An approximately one-quarter-inch thick layer of newspapers placed over bare soil will inhibit just about anything from growing. I wet the paper so it stays in place, and a few rocks also help. This is useful if you pull weeds, but don't plan to cultivate anything in the bare soil right away. The same method can be used to kill weeds or grass already present. Cover with damp newspaper and check every week or so until the unwanted plants are dead and easily removed.

I hate throwing away toilet paper roll cores. What a waste. Instead, cut them in half and place a few in a tray to keep them from tipping. Filled with potting mix, they are perfect for starting small seeds without wasting the volume of soil a larger pot would require. Once outgrown, the rolls can be opened to remove and plant the contents.

Cinder blocks

Cinder block planters are almost too good to be true: cheap, very durable, stackable and not bad looking—you can even paint them. They are manufactured with internal cavities to reduce weight, and these cavities are an ideal size to house small plants. There are even split-face concrete blocks created with a textured faux stone finish available in

different colors. Place them on soil and fill their centers with the planting medium and plant of your choice. You can treat them like any other pot, albeit one with an open bottom.

Cinder blocks are available typically with two cavities, but also as smaller half blocks, so you can stack them in interesting patterns. Unlike wood, when used as the border of a raised bed, they will not decay, plus can hold plants themselves! Think of them as building blocks for horticulturally minded adults.

Shipping pallets in the garden

Pallet gardening has become very popular in recent years. Shipping pallets are often discarded after a shipment is delivered, but the lumber has many possibilities. Pallets can be disassembled to delineate raised beds or laid flat and their open areas filled with soil to create ready-made rows. An ambitious gardener can use one vertically as an herb or succulent garden; weed-blocking fabric stapled to the back and bottom areas holds soil while allowing for drainage.

Pallet wood has already been treated to kill any potential pests along for the ride. Look for a stamp somewhere on the pallet that, along with other information, shows the letters "HT," indicating it was heat-treated and should be safe to handle. If instead you find "MB," the wood was fumigated with methyl bromide and should not be used. Fortunately, the latter treatment is being phased out. If the wood appears stained by oil or other contaminants, discard it.

Composting

Composting turns your yard and kitchen scraps (uncooked only) into rich soil. It's a topic unto itself, with many books written on the subject. It's almost like magic: combine organic debris, some water, and the result is natural, nutrient-rich soil. I encourage you to research composting for yourself—it is the ultimate in recycling and frugal gardening. 