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CONTAIN YOURSELF

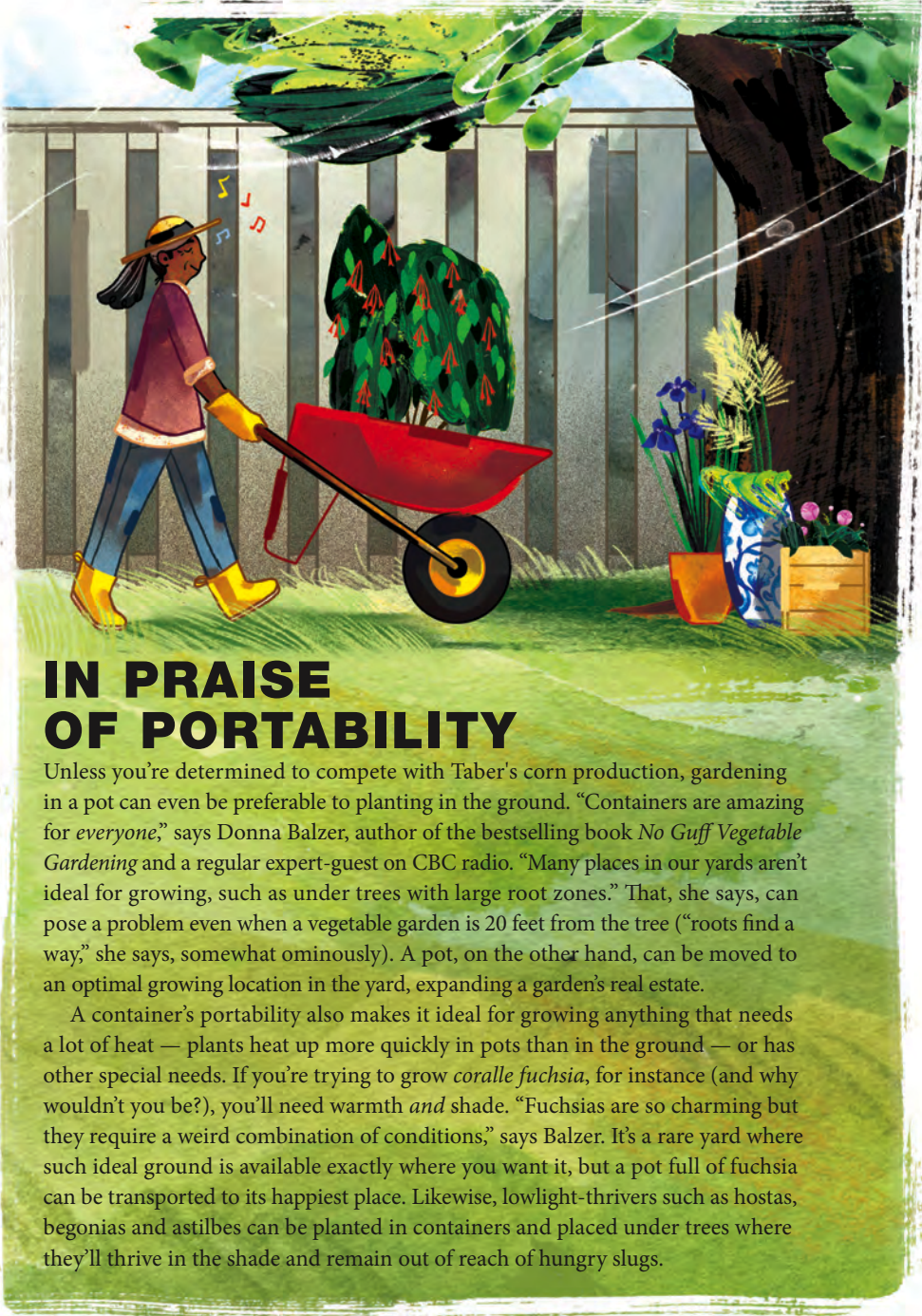
Growing flowers and vegetables in containers is as old as dirt, still, there are fresh ways to go about it. From how to be bolder and plant smarter, to the wonders of worm poop, here's how to get growing (in pots) this season.

Along with solving the ultimate question to life, the universe, and everything in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* book series (the answer is 42, of course), the late Douglas Adams asks readers to ponder another existential question: "Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it, too?"

Heck yes! Who needs magic, when cultivating a container garden in Calgary — whether for tasty veggies or pretty flowers or some combination of both — is so easy? That's right, I said easy. Toss aside everything you've been told about the futility of our climate zone 4A growing (a fairly recent bump up from our previous 3B designation), and stay with me on this.

Container gardening is defined as, well, gardening in a container. While ceramic, clay, metal and plastic pots are most common, just about anything from an old bucket to an abandoned bathtub will do. As long it's filled with soil and sports a drainage hole in the bottom, your circa-2013 Nike Air Foamposite sneaker qualifies as a garden container (certainly, there is no better use for that shoe). Either way, corralling your garden in pots is no longer perceived as a consolation prize for folks without yards; rather, container gardening and related products occupy an increasingly large territory in gardening centres as an elegant, practical and bountiful answer to maximizing both food production and ornamental drama on any scale.





IN PRAISE OF PORTABILITY

Unless you're determined to compete with Taber's corn production, gardening in a pot can even be preferable to planting in the ground. "Containers are amazing for *everyone*," says Donna Balzer, author of the bestselling book *No Guff Vegetable Gardening* and a regular expert-guest on CBC radio. "Many places in our yards aren't ideal for growing, such as under trees with large root zones." That, she says, can pose a problem even when a vegetable garden is 20 feet from the tree ("roots find a way," she says, somewhat ominously). A pot, on the other hand, can be moved to an optimal growing location in the yard, expanding a garden's real estate.

A container's portability also makes it ideal for growing anything that needs a lot of heat — plants heat up more quickly in pots than in the ground — or has other special needs. If you're trying to grow *coral fuchsia*, for instance (and why wouldn't you be?), you'll need warmth *and* shade. "Fuchsias are so charming but they require a weird combination of conditions," says Balzer. It's a rare yard where such ideal ground is available exactly where you want it, but a pot full of fuchsia can be transported to its happiest place. Likewise, lowlight-thrivers such as hostas, begonias and astilbes can be planted in containers and placed under trees where they'll thrive in the shade and remain out of reach of hungry slugs.

SEIZE THE DAY (BY ITS ROOTS)

The beauty of container planting is, of course, the relatively easy ride. Still, a bit of TLC can take your pot from meh to marvy. At the end of the season, pull out the old plants from the roots (if you missed that step last fall, right now is fine, too; we'll wait here). And don't be shy about it, either. In fact, if your pot is 14 or more inches in height, Balzer recommends digging out at least six to eight inches of soil and tossing the whole shebang into your compost. With that, she makes a particularly stirring

philosophical point that might sum up the very soul of gratifying gardening in Zone 4A: "Maybe we can stop caring so much about perennials versus annuals in every case. Many plants don't work as perennials here, they don't overwinter as they would in other parts of the world, and that's okay."

So, out with the old, and in with something fresh that thrills you to your toes. "If you've fallen for a hydrangea, don't worry, just enjoy it and know that it may not come back" If it does? Count yourself a magical garden fairy.



INTO THE WORMHOLE

Chelsie Anderson is a Calgary-based natural-gardening educator and author. As such, she's an advocate for the power of worm castings to bring soil to vibrant life, particularly in pots where plants don't have access to the minerals, microbes or moisture naturally found in the earth. "Potting soil is a sterile mix," says Anderson. "You don't get the critters that benefit plants grown directly in the ground." The beauty of adding worm castings, she says, is that "you get all those beneficial guys to kickstart the system."

Worm castings are a by-product of vermicompost — basically, worm manure that works as a rich, natural fertilizer. An alternative to chemical fertilizers that can leach water and damage soil, worm castings can improve and sustain soil by adding beneficial bacteria and fungi that deliver nutrients from the soil to a plant's roots. "Castings add microbes that feed plants naturally, as well as add minerals in well-balanced proportion," Anderson says. Perhaps most noticeably, the addition of worm castings, which Anderson suggests replenishing annually to pots, means less water is required. "The casting works like a sponge, it helps the soil maintain moisture really well, which can mean 50 to 75 per cent less watering."

So, how to worm-cast like a pro? Mix 25 per cent castings to 75 per cent potting soil in your container (some experts say go as far as 50/50). Plant your plants. Sprinkle some castings on top for good measure, and then sit back and watch things grow. (Note to the squeamish: a bag of worm castings does *not* contain actual worms; it looks similar to coffee grounds, and you'll find it at most gardening shops.) Avoid supplementing the castings with chemical fertilizers as you'll likely kill the microbes that are busily trying to teach the soil to feed itself.

And, if you think DIY vermiculture might be your jam, check in with Anderson at chelsiesgardens.com for upcoming workshops and events.

FRUIT AND VEG OUT

Sometimes, an otherwise wayward edible just needs lovingly enforced boundaries. Strawberries have a reputation in Calgary for being disappointingly unproductive, but can thrive when contained. Balzer says that's because, when planted directly in the ground, strawberry plants "can kind of take off on you," running rampant ground cover and sending out energy-sucking shoots at a rate that prohibits berry production. Contained, however, they can grow exceptionally well in Calgary.

Last spring, Balzer tried something new with her berries, to delightful result. "I drilled holes every foot or so in a 10-foot length of eavestrough — just a regular rain gutter from the hardware store — filled it with soil and planted strawberry plants every six inches or so." She hung the gutter on small metal brackets screwed to her fence and, she says, "we had *amazing* strawberries until quite late in the season."

Balzer has also had delightful results with container-grown summer squash. "It was such an unexpected surprise," she says. "It grew down the side of the pot and spilled onto the sidewalk. The flowers were so pretty and the leaves were 30 centimetres wide and really exotic-looking."

Hearty herbs such as sage, thyme, mint and rosemary look great in a pot, which can be positioned for easy access from the kitchen. Balzer tucks herbs in with just about any mix of potted plants for pizzazz and practicality. One of her most dazzling recent discoveries was potted saffron. Commonly grown in Iran, Greece and India, saffron is derived from the flower of *crocus sativus*; it's essentially a pretty, purple, fall crocus. "By the end of August, pots start to look pretty horrible," says Balzer. "Go get yourself some saffron bulbs — they're not easy to find but some stores will have them — and crowd them into a pot and they'll bloom in the fall, providing nectar and pollen for late bees" (if not saffron threads to finesse your paella).



TOP 5 PRETTIEST POTTED PLANTS

All we *really* want out of our gardens is something gorgeous to fawn over, right?
Kath Smyth of the Calgary Horticultural Society shares her top-five stunners best grown in pots.



New Zealand Flax
(*Phormium*)

"This is a big plant that doesn't grow well in a garden, but it's great for pots. I love it because of its rainbow colours. Plant around it with purple foliage, flowers with texture, pink flowers, maybe a trailer. It lends itself to all sorts of looks because it has a beautiful wide, strap-shaped blade."



King Tut Grass
(*Cyperus Papyrus*)

"Essentially a water plant, this one just kills me in the summer when the flowers suddenly pop out of the little umbrella-like heads. It's reedy and soft and has a lovely flow to it. I companion it with one of my favourite hanging plants."



Climbing Snapdragon
(*Asarina*)

"This one has a bell-shaped flower that looks similar to fuchsia, but it's a little different. It's a deep-purple colour and it's just stunning in a pot, on its own, or [with] a few old-fashioned flowers like zinnias or asters."



Cup-and-Saucer Vine
(*Cobaea Scandens*)

"I have a privacy screen on my deck and this pink, purple and white flowering plant just scrambles all over it. I'll do it alone in a pot because I love how it climbs up the eight-foot trellis that leans on my screen. My dog Marigold thinks it's all just for her; she loves the shade."



African Daisies

"I'm a big fan of this daisy that opens and closes with the sun. It loves my sunny deck where I pot it with English ivy. And I like to surprise people, so I'll add in herbs like sage, parsley, maybe basil, for their texture."



THE ART OF CONTAINER GARDENING (OR LOVE, COURAGE AND COLOUR IN A POT)

So now your soil is ready, your confidence is up, and you're sold on the fact that planting food and flowers in a pot is where it's at. It's time to go for it. Calgary Horticultural Society's Kath Smyth (who formerly taught a course at the University of Calgary called, yep, *The Art of Container Gardening*) has a tried-and-true, knock-your-socks-off opening act she recommends to kick off planting season.

A devoted advocate for upping our gardening courage and joy index, Smyth suggests getting summer bulbs in a pot ASAP — try begonias, canna lilies or her favourite, butterfly gladiolus (*haemanthus*). “Plant them now, while it's still spring, and then, as soon as possible, cover them with annuals, like pansies, or anything colourful you love,” she says. Sometime around the end of June or mid-July, the bulbs will find their way up and around the annuals. “I call these my ‘forgot-I-put-you-there’ pots,” says Smyth. “You’ll just suddenly see these strap-like leaves come up and then (if you planted butterfly glads) white flowers with purple eyes. It’s such a wonderful and beautifully fragrant surprise.”

Smyth also recommends scattering pots here and there throughout your yard, perhaps in places where a perennial didn't survive or in a spot where you haven't yet decided what to plant in the ground. “Just toss in seeds of colourful,

old-fashioned favourites such as bachelor buttons or zinnias.” *Voilà!*: simple, cheap, exuberant. “You just need to feel the joy, that's what this is about.”

The art of perfecting a container “recipe” is a fairly loose, gratifying and always-illuminating endeavour. Be weird, be wild. Don't be afraid to put plants and seeds side by side; veg and flowers together; trailers or climbers with anything. A solid but unexpected combo that Smyth returns to time and time again in a shady part of her yard is rainbow chard seeds (and/or beets) planted alongside begonias. Edible *and* unexpectedly pretty is always the high watermark in container gardening (Calgary's bulletproof garden-darling, kale, grows well with everything). Smyth is also a fan of flowers from the daisy family paired with early small cucumbers, which will climb fetchingly over the pot. “A daisy-shaped flower like a gerbera will attract pollinators,” she says. “The bees then discover that the vegetable is there flowering as well, so they'll pollinate the cucumber plant for good success.” Smyth also said something about a boy flower and a girl flower, but this is a family magazine.

At the heart of all of it, of course, is that urban gardening here in Zone 4A, or any zone for that matter, should be approached with both passion and a light touch, and regular watering. (About that, give hanging baskets a miss if you don't like daily, or twice-daily watering). Gardening should be a conversation starter, a source of pride and relaxation, an annual experiment, a wonder. You don't have to spend much, nor strive for a 100-per cent success rate, to be astounded and delighted by what comes out of a pot of dirt.

GROW YOUR EXCITEMENT

These products and resources will get you pumped up for the gardening season, which for zone 4A residents kicks off unofficially on the May long weekend.

Think Globally, Act Locally

The global bucket was developed as a low-tech system for fighting malnutrition around the world by making growing food cheap, easy and water-efficient. These self-watering containers are typically made by stacking a couple of five-gallon buckets and adding a bottom reservoir. To make one check out the dozens of YouTube how-tos online.

The Medium is the Message

Think twice before spending \$500-plus on a fancy ceramic pot big enough to overwinter a VW. Left out in winter, it's at risk of cracking due to moisture in the soil. Go a couple of sizes down so it can be wheeled into the garage or under a carport until spring.

The Fabric of Our Plant Life

Fabric planting containers can be planted in-ground or used like typical pots. Designed to improve and insulate a plant root system, the breathable fabric allows roots to grow outward in a natural pattern that's not possible with a plastic or metal container.

Turn On, Tune In

Donna Balzer's podcast *Helping Gardeners Grow* is a chatty, informative mix of tips and tricks and other gems to thrill gardeners and armchair gardeners alike. Find it on the usual podcast channels, or subscribe at donnabalzer.com.

Contained Within These Pages

Kath Smyth of the Calgary Horticultural Society has a long list of favourite gardening books whose origins are both local and further flung, but her pick of the moment is *Edible Container Gardening for Canada*, a sturdy softcover by Edmonton-based expert gardener Rob Sproule, that is a practical and inspiring source of container recipes and helpful tips. 🍷