

Gardening on the Web

Lisa Stefaniak



Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners
<http://peterboroughgardens.ca/articles.html>

One of the most satisfying aspects of gardening is its connection to ancient practices. When we dig a garden, plant a seed, hoe a veggie patch, or gather a bouquet, we follow a well-worn path of practical wisdom that stretches back to the very origins of human culture. Gardeners need information as much as they need warm sunshine, gentle rain, and fertile soil. In the past, we relied on books and each other, but now a vast virtual library of knowledge is just a click away.

The Internet may be a digital superhighway, but for gardeners it is really that same worn path of gardening lore. Whether you're just starting out or you're an avid gardener desperate to get your hands back into warm soil, now is the time to do some research and planning for the spring. But rather than poring over seed catalogues and thumbing through all kinds of books, from basic how-to manuals to garden writing classics – which has its charm, of course – now we can do our dreaming and planning online.

As you may know, the fastest way to access information online is to use your favourite search engine. For example, if you use Google to search for information on when to sow snow peas or the hardiness zone for that 'Forest Pansy' Redbud you covet, you will quickly learn that 'Forest Pansy' is hardy to zone 5 (USDA), and that snow peas should be sown before Anzac Day (the 25th of April in Australia and New Zealand). Unfortunately, these answers reveal that the global reach of the web is sometimes a liability, for Canadian hardiness zones are quite different from their U.S. counterparts ('Forest Pansy' is hardy to Canadian zone 7), and the general rule for snow peas in central and southern Ontario is to plant "as soon as the ground can be worked," which can vary considerably from year to year. It's ironic that searching for plant lore on the World Wide Web reminds us constantly to remember where we live. And this leads to my first tip: use google.ca (rather than .com) and tick the box that says "pages from Canada." This will limit search results to sites originating from Canadian servers.

Websites created by educational institutions or the government are good bets for reliable information. If you need to look up a native plant, have a look at the Native

Plant Database at Evergreen.ca. If it is an ornamental tree, shrub, or vine, you can search the database at the University of Connecticut Department of Horticulture: www.hort.uconn.edu/plants (but remember that those are USDA hardiness zones!) This excellent database includes extensive images for plant identification, a pronunciation guide for botanical names, and a list of common cultivars. And don't forget our local retailers and growers: Griffins Greenhouses and Johnston's Greenhouse and Garden Centre have informative webpages, and you can even do some online shopping at Gardens Plus in Donwood, a daylily and hosta specialist nursery. If you want to browse through a really comprehensive and eclectic catalogue, check out Lost Horizons Nursery, an independent specialist nursery near Guelph that offers rare and hard-to-find plants.

But gardening is about more than acquiring information. Gardeners are also inveterate sharers of everything: plants, tips, advice, lore, you name it. Happily, the Internet offers vast resources for anyone who wants to participate in a thriving online gardening community. Whether you want answers to basic gardening questions or you want to indulge your passion for hellebores, antiquarian roses, or zucchinis, browse the forums and share images at gardenweb.com, davesgarden.com, and icangarden.com (a Canadian site). If you're looking for a "contemporary, laid back approach to gardening [that] places equal importance on environmentalism, style, affordability, art, and humour," check out yougrowgirl.com. If you like your gardening with a little politics, check out the more challenging opinions of the contributors at gardenrant.com, whose Manifesto declares that they are "bored with perfect gardening magazines" and "in love with real, rambling, chaotic, dirty, bug-ridden gardens." If blogs are your thing, peruse blotanical.com, a site that collects gardening blogs from around the globe, including 89 from Canada (at last count).

The mega-popular Facebook hosts several gardening groups, but for a more richly multimedia experience, check out Myfolia.com, a social networking site that connects gardeners from around the globe based on zones. Best of all, Myfolia hosts an online gardening journal where you can keep track of all your gardens and plants with notes and photos that never get left out in the rain. It's fun to see what people are growing in other parts of the world; you can look over the virtual fence and get a truly global perspective.

Sooner or later, though, you will want to connect with local gardeners or ask a question about something like what kind of tree is best for a small garden in Peterborough. In this case, you can connect with our local horticultural society and the Peterborough Master Gardeners online at peterboroughgardens.ca. If you have a question, submit it online or even use the telephone, or browse the amazing archives of past Examiner articles and other tip sheets tailored for our bioregion. As any global traveler knows, sometimes the best paths lead right to our own back doors.

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner