

SNOW JOBS by Edythe Falconer

Discover Your “Indoor” Garden

With a shovel you carve out snowy walks around your wintery landscape. Or from your armchair you peer wistfully through a frosty pane at your plantless patio or balcony. Either way you long to get down on hands and knees, in the dirt and sweaty, to whack intrusive weeds and aggressive cultivars and to perfectly populate the spaces now left vacant. Fortunately, for those who want to keep green thumbs busy all year long, there are numerous interesting alternatives. Let’s start with an indoor fishpond.

Fishpond

You can set up an aquarium with exactly one fish, one plant, some fish food, a water conditioner, a gallon of water and a tiny net. You will not need an aerator as long as you choose cold-water fish - goldfish and beta fish. This miniature ecosystem will teach you the pond basics that also apply to more grandiose outdoor schemes. Fish need air, water, food and space. It’s that simple. Most pet stores can supply you with everything you need. Many second-hand stores sell inexpensive clear glass containers. A dainty carpet of pebbles or gravel will round out your pond décor.

Easily moved from one location to another, your minimalist work of art can be style in motion. It can complement your various houseplant groupings or stand alone as a main focus. Your cat will be interested too - cat TV!

Terrariums

Your next project could be establishing a Lilliputian plant world in your son’s discarded fish tank, or if you wish, in an ultra-stylish Wardian case.

Originally Wardian cases were used to transport exotic plants safely on long journeys at sea. Today they are readily available in a number of styles and sizes. Unlike most fish tanks, these containers are fully enclosed little glass houses, vented or unvented according to the moisture needs of the plants inside.



Wardian case. Photo by Diane McClymont Peace

For this project purchase very small and/or very young plants – especially those that need extra humidity to counter arid winter indoor environments. There are many, many choices that thrive in a moisturized setting. Some of them are: Swedish Ivy, Bird Nest

Sansevieria, Maidenhair Spleenwort, Club Moss, Button Fern, Hens and Chicks, Irish Moss and Baby Tears. These are all relatively small but you can include larger plants in larger containers. To provide good drainage you will need a 2-4cm layer of coarse material such as pebbles or gravel for the bottom of the container. Next will be a thin layer of charcoal to control odor, some sphagnum moss to keep soil separate from the pebbles, and finally a 2-4cm layer of potting soil. Then do a rehearsal. Try different arrangements for different effects. When you have a design that pleases you, install plants in their new home and press the soil down around them. A related challenge is the bottle terrarium. Stay cool with this one or you will be gardening with a bottle. It takes patience to manipulate the tools for this job. Chopsticks are useful for positioning plants and a newspaper funnel will feed in the ingredients listed above. A wooden dowel can help you tamp down the earth around each plant. This is a breeze compared to what an astronaut must manage when “out” doing a repair job in space.

Living Centre Pieces

You have a straggly plant you can't bear to part with without bringing on a serious attack of guilt. Soldier on. It's time to divide and conquer. Take some cuttings. Stem cuttings are fairly straight-forward. Place sections of stem with two or three leaves still attached in water until rootlets are formed. While the roots develop sitting in an attractive, smallish vase, they can do double duty as decor for the dining table or sideboard. Once roots have formed you will need pots, pot trays and potting soil. Basal cuttings are stem cuttings that have a tiny section of the crown of the plant still attached. They can be planted directly into soil. In either case when potting up you may choose to lightly dip roots or the tips of cuttings into rooting powder to speed additional root growth. Basal cuttings too can spend time as centre pieces while they horticopy themselves for the next generation. When you have everything rooted and potted you must find new homes for them. Supposedly this is much easier than finding homes for a litter of kittens.

If you have a really strong stomach and are not prone to guilt issues you can buy a whole new plant solely for the purpose of taking it apart and propagating more of the same just because you want to learn how to do cuttings. Or you can do it because your Garden Club is having a plant sale in the spring and wants more starter houseplants this time round! Three common houseplants that lend themselves easily to stem propagation are Coleus, Impatiens and Pelargonium (Annual Geranium).

These three prime leads replete with lots of fun and experimentation with fishy, funny, fertile, ferny, delightful world of flora and fauna, can nurse your indoor gardener through the challenges of the winter season. All of us can indeed be year round gardeners. And if winter's here spring can't be far behind!