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## Keep those Plant Tags!

Nancy McDonald

**W**hat do you do with those plant tags when you get home? Keep them or toss them away?

You may have decided you do not need to keep them as you know the name of the plant. This will bring difficulty later when you have questions about pruning and you cannot remember the type you purchased. It is especially likely with a clematis or hydrangea, and fruit bushes like raspberry. Or a friend asks the name of a particular cultivar in your garden they would like to grow, but you cannot recall the name. Even keeping the plant tags on annuals is useful as often, if I am trying a new annual and it has been successful, I will want to repurchase.

Let us look at several plant labels with distinct types of information. There are four plant tags in the photo: *Lobelia cardinalis*, *Veronica* x 'First Love,' *Hydrangea* 'Invincible Wee White' and *Schlumbergera truncata* (common name Zygocactus). The front of the tag has the botanical name. The first word refers to the genus, the second is the species. This is the most valuable information on the plant tag as you can use it to do further research on the plant. Newer plant tags have QR codes which you can scan and read the information easily on your phone. This can guide your purchasing, such as when you read that the plant you were considering is acid-loving and unsuitable for your garden. A mistake to avoid!

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## You Know You're a Gardener When...



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### Plant ID tags

Nancy McDonald

On the backs of all tags, you will find information about growing conditions for the plants either in text or graphics such as sun symbols to indicate light requirements. Garden plant tags show expected height and width at maturity which is particularly valuable to consider before planting. The shrub label includes spacing requirements and often planting tips with a graphic to illustrate. All outdoor plant tags include zone hardiness and expected bloom time. The information on zone hardiness is particularly important as choosing plants for our growing zone 5A means they will have a better chance to both survive and thrive.

The label for *Lobelia cardinalis* indicates it is a straight species as there are no additional words in single quotation marks on the tag. The tag has pictures of a bee, bird, hummingbird and butterfly, letting you know this native plant is beneficial for wildlife in your garden. The Lobelia tag has additional information: "Beautiful native plant whose scarlet red tubular flowers are abundantly distributed along the stem. Prefers a rich, slightly humid soil and semi-shaded areas." It was good to read the description as I now understand afternoon shade is appreciated.

In *Veronica* x 'First Love', the 'x' informs us that this is a hybrid - a cross between two species of *Veronica*. Plant breeders have chosen "parent" plants to

## Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan, Agnieszka Keough

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

*Last year, we regraded with new soil an area on the north side of our house, which is also shaded by a large oak. We seeded with a shade-tolerant lawn mix. We also did similar work on the south side using a sun-tolerant mix. The growth on the north side is very sparse compared to the sunny area. Is there any hope of creating a thick lawn in shady conditions or will grass always struggle to grow? Should we give up and try to use some groundcover for shade? I heard some native sedges will grow in shade, but will I get good coverage to suppress the weeds?*

If you want a thick, lush lawn in the shade, that is probably not possible. However, you may be able to improve what you have. Let's address a couple of variables, and other things you can try.

**Seed:** Not all shade mixes are created equal. What types of grasses were included in your mix? Fescues (red creeping fescue, tall fescue, and hard fescue) and perennial ryegrass are generally the best varieties for shade in this climate.

**Growing conditions:** Even shade-tolerant grasses need some light; if it's really deep shade they will struggle regardless. With the site being under a large tree, you should provide extra water and fertilizer to anything planted underneath as the tree will use some of the resources.

**Overseeding:** Grasses in shade may not be as vigorous or long-lived as their sun counterparts. Fescues are also a finer-textured grass. You can try overseeding the area on a yearly basis to thicken coverage.

**Sedges and other groundcovers:** If you decide

cross breed looking for a new variety with desirable characteristics. This hybrid Veronica has both a dwarf size and bright colour to recommend it to gardeners. On the front of the tag, it has the word 'new' which is a marketing enticement for plant hunters.

The *Hydrangea* 'Invincibelle Wee White' with the single quotation marks indicates it is a cultivar of *Hydrangea aborescens* and bred for desired attributes. This cultivar is a dwarf. When released in 2018, it was marketed as the only dwarf Annabelle in the world. The stems of this cultivar are sturdy, another desirable attribute.

The zygocactus is a houseplant I purchased for the white blooms on this cultivar. It has the smallest tag with tiny writing which can be frustrating for any purchaser. Two of the most important conditions for houseplant success are light conditions and watering requirements. The tag informs me it needs a "bright and cool location. Do not expose to direct sunlight. Fertilize once every 2-3 weeks. Keep soil moist." When I see 'keep soil moist', to me it means water it well and never let it completely dry out. The fertilizer recommendation was unexpected and on further research refers to when the plant is outdoors in the summer.

I save my plant tags in a file folder that indicates the year purchased. The same folder stores my seed orders and receipts of plants with a warranty. Another Master Gardener uses a key ring for the plant tags and separates the categories on different rings, e.g. annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees. Whatever way you choose, my advice always is to keep that plant tag. 🌱

**Tip:** Keep watering and feeding the pots of daffodils, tulips and hyacinths bought to brighten the dark days of winter, as these can be planted outside as the weather warms. Plant the potted bulbs, at the normal depth, in any spaces that would benefit from some spring colour. The bulbs can be separated or left as a clump. Add plenty of compost. In a couple years time they should be flowering once again.

that you prefer alternate plantings under the oak, sedges (*Carex* spp.) will certainly give you some options, although you may have to look around to find them. Most sedges are evergreen and are often left unmowed. That may change the look of the area. You will likely have to do some weeding.

Often sedges like a bit of a moister area. *Carex pensylvanica* is both shade and drought-tolerant. Once established, it will spread by stolons to form a relatively dense mat. *Carex eburnea* and *C. appalachica* are more clump-forming, but easy to grow in shade to part sun conditions. A recent trial of sedges at Mt. Cuba Center in the United States found that *C. pensylvanica* and *C. eburnea* both do quite well when mowed as a lawn.

You could mix the sedges with other native shade-tolerant groundcovers and wildflowers. This would create a kind of meadow effect, and help with weed suppression as well. Some shorter things you could try would be bunchberry, wild ginger, Canada mayflower, wood and creeping phloxes, and violets (*Viola sororia* and *V. pedata*). For taller flowering plants, try zigzag or bluestem goldenrod, white wood aster, Canada anemone (this one spreads quickly, so use caution), New York fern, and wild geranium.

If you find growth is still sparser under the tree than you'd prefer, another option could be to have an unplanted mulch ring around the trunk. With groundcovers surrounding it, and allowing them to creep a little way into the mulch area, it would soften the edges.

*When do you know it's time to take the covers off shrubs after winter? What happens if you leave the covers on for too long?*

The time to uncover shrubs will depend upon the reason you decided to cover them. Was it snow and ice damage, windburn, salt spray, or maybe rodent damage that was the concern?



## In my garden I saw...



A Canada goose pair (*Branta canadensis*) in the pool

Shelley Pelkey

It is fine to uncover things if it is unlikely the hazard will occur again during the season. This year, for instance, we had quite a warm, open, winter. By mid-March, it seemed unlikely that more heavy snow, salt spray, or icy wind would occur before next winter. The ground was thawed, so it was fairly safe to unwrap shrubs covered with the weather in mind, although rodent protection might still be needed in some situations.

If possible, choose an overcast day to uncover plants. Plants that go abruptly from darker wrapped conditions to bright sun are at higher risk of sunscald. In general, you want to get plants uncovered when the daytime temperature is consistently about 10°C, even if it is before the last expected frost. This will help them to acclimate slowly. However, if the temperature looks as if it is going to abruptly get much warmer than that, uncover your plants early. You can always put a temporary cover over them if there's bad weather again.

If it gets too warm and damp under the wrappings, you will have good conditions for molds to thrive. Leaves or debris inside may start to rot in place - not ideal conditions for plant health. 🌿

## Gardening in Small Spaces

Dale Odorizzi

**A**s our population expands, more homes such as townhouses and apartment buildings are built, yards are smaller, and gardeners have less space to ply our favorite hobby. A small space is no reason we must stop gardening.

Small spaces have many special challenges. Balconies are usually long and narrow, too shady, too sunny, or, worst of all, too windy. Small yards are often impacted by fences or nearby buildings. For these reasons, it is critical to develop a plan.

As with the start of any garden project, decide how you want to use your garden. Use a sheet of graph

paper to sketch out your garden design. Do a sun-shade analysis to determine how much sun you get in the different corners of your garden so you know what plants you can grow successfully. Draw in any permanent structures—existing or planned walks, patios or decks, fences, trees, driveway, and your house. Consider who will be using your space—children, pets, and if special accommodations are necessary.

Containers can be your best friends in small spaces. Think upwards. Vertical gardens that use trellises, vertical planters and containers make the most of your space. Vining plants such as pole



Scarlet runners take advantage of the railing.

Dale Odorizzi



Tomatoes do well in containers. Use determinate varieties for best results.

Dale Odorizzi



One foot square template with different coloured holes. Depending on what you are planting, a chart shows spacing.

Kevin Long

beans and cucumbers thrive in this type of set-up.

Companion planting is not limited to large gardens. Basil and tomatoes do well in each other's company and happily share a container. Herb gardens in general are perfect for small spaces. Look into implementing square foot gardening techniques.

If you have room, consider a small tree or shrub. Look at the size it will eventually grow. Pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*) is a beautiful choice, but it can grow up to six metres tall and wide. Do not plant it too close to hard structures that will cause your tree to lean away and into your yard.

For something smaller, consider the red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*). It flowers in the spring, has berries the birds love in the summer, and beautiful colour year-round. While it can grow up to five metres tall, it benefits from coppicing, cutting stems back to ground level to encourage new red stems, keeping it small and beautiful.

If your new home is in a high-rise building with a balcony, take advantage of it to create a garden. Before you rush out to buy plants and pots and soil, remember that balcony gardens have specific challenges. Although you have exclusive use of your balcony, it is owned by the building owners. Check with building management before you get started. Some have rules about railing planters, weight of containers or watering.

Consider the logistics. How do you get your containers and soil up to your balcony? Where do you store your tools? How will you get water to your plants? In a hot windy garden, you will be watering your plants often, likely daily or more. Since small containers dry out often, you will also need to fertilize more often. I usually start my containers with an extra helping of compost and add slow-release pellets twice a season. Choose light-weight containers. The soil will give them the weight they need to hold them in place. Your plants are the attraction, not the pots.

Garden soil or topsoil is much too heavy and dense





Deadhead gazania regularly to keep your pots blooming.

*Dale Odorizzi*



Plant carrots in the middle to take advantage of the depth.

*Kevin Long*



for your containers. It will pack down and not drain well. Choose instead a potting soil or soilless mix. These tend to be lightweight and provide good drainage for your plants. They provide little nutrition so your plants will need fertilizer on a regular basis.

If you want to grow perennials in your containers, choose plants that are hardy a zone or two lower than where you live. Keep in mind that the climate on your balcony is much harsher than it is on the ground. Overwintering perennials in your containers is difficult as containers are much more likely to be impacted by the freeze-thaw cycle. I have not been successful leaving perennials in my 9th floor patio.

House plants that overwinter in your home may do well on your balcony. Rather than grow a tree in a container, consider moving your oleander, hibiscus, or other larger houseplants outside to add beauty to your balcony garden. These may need hardening off before going outside and debugging before going back in.

Plant plants that attract pollinators. I am always excited to see bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies on my plants.

In our building, more and more containers and hanging baskets are popping up on the balcony rails in the summer, making our building look less like a monolith of brick and cement and more like a welcoming home. Why not give it a go? Have fun and share your enjoyment with your neighbours. ♻️

Happiness is being visited by a butterfly (black swallowtail).

*Dale Odorizzi*

## Great Gardening Tools: Garden Claw

*Julianne Labreche*



Garden claw  
*Julianne Labreche*

I bought my Garden Claw decades ago, soon after I got serious about gardening. Thinking back, I remember its name sounded vaguely reminiscent of a bad horror movie. Nightmare visions of a giant claw chasing its victim through the back garden captured my imagination. Who knew, years later, this Garden Claw would be my favourite tool? Since purchasing it, there have only been sweet dreams of its ease and efficiency.

The Garden Claw is ideal for gardeners with any sort of soil, but it is especially helpful if you have clay, compacted, or rocky soil. The four claw-like shaped tines at its base act like a non-mechanical cultivator, tilling, loosening and aerating the soil. The user simply holds the waist height handles, attached to an S-shaped bar, firmly. Then move it

back and forth, about forty-five degrees to the right, then to the left. Back and forth you go, the Claw descends into the dirt. With these actions, the Claw slowly turns up stones and unearths chunks of soil and other garden debris.

It's easier to use than a shovel because this back-and-forth motion permits the user to dig a hole faster, and in a circular shape. Many times, I have used the Garden Claw to dig a hole in my garden to plant purchased potted perennials or annuals, or create a hole for bulbs. I appreciate that the work is done with minimal disturbance to the surrounding soil. In this way, planting is tidy and efficient.

I like too how my Garden Claw loosens the soil in a new hole, aerating it. It also reduces extra weeding, digging up weeds as it breaks up the soil. Once the Garden Claw has done its job, I can amend the soil, adding some compost before filling up the hole again.

The original Garden Claw, designed in bright blue and yellow, retails for about thirty dollars. It is probably best suited to small or medium-sized suburban properties, given that it is a hand-held tool. The simple back and forth motion of its handle can cause your wrists and hips to tire easily. It is designed for short-term use, probably for no longer than an hour, at least if my own past experience serves as a lesson.

Since it was originally marketed, a newer model is being sold that is height adjustable. This is an added bonus, given that both short and tall gardeners can use it with less back strain. A mini-garden claw is available as well for smaller spaces, such as a flower box or planter.

That said, I prefer my original Garden Claw. Undoubtedly, it will be taken out of winter storage and used once again as soon as spring arrives. It's a Claw without a flaw, I'd say. 🌱



## In the Alcove Garden: Meadow Anemone—*Anemonastrum canadense*

Candace Dressler



Meadow anemone  
Candace Dressler

**Botanical Name:** *Anemonastrum canadense*, syn *Anemone canadensis*

**Common Names:** Canadian windflower, Canadian anemone, meadow anemone

**Family Name:** Ranunculaceae (buttercup)

**Height:** 30 - 60 cm

**Spread:** Colonizing groundcover.

**Type of Plant:** native perennial, herb

**CDA Hardiness Zone:** 3-7

**Leaves:** Simple, deeply lobed opposite basal leaves. Usually one or two whorls per stem.

**Flowers:** Early May – June, 10 cm white flowers with 5 petals and bright yellow stamens bloom facing up.

**Stems/roots:** Slender stems on lots of fibrous roots.

Young plants may appear to have a taproot, but it is a rhizome.

**Seed:** Achene (small, dry, one-seeded)

**Other characteristics:** A good plant for groundcover planting in moist shady areas. Often occurs in large colonies in the wild. This plant is deer and rabbit resistant and tolerates compacted soil.

**Toxicity:** Although used medicinally by Indigenous people, all parts of this plant are toxic when eaten in large quantities.

**Propagation and Control:** It can be very vigorous. This plant spreads both by rhizome and by seed. Deadhead the flowers to prevent spread and be ruthless when keeping them in their spot. Can be propagated via root cuttings or from seed. Does not transplant well.

**Seasonal colour:** Early summer colour that last 3-4 weeks.

**Culture:** Prefers moderately moist organic, rich soil. Will tolerate poor quality sandy, rocky and clay soils.

**Landscape Use:** Best in part shade. Needs more moisture in part to full sun. Works well for erosion control and to fill in around taller perennials.

**Native country:** Canada and northeast and central USA

**Host to:** Larvae of moths *Loscopia velata* syn. *Amphipoea velata* (veiled ear moth), and *Sparganothis unifasciana* (one-lined sparganothis). It also provides nectar and pollen for native bees and attracts many predatory insects that control pest insects.



Canada anemone is a beautiful, bright, white flower early in the year. They start to bloom as the native bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) fades. In a home garden, Canada anemone serves as a groundcover. It will grow thick and choke out all of the plants around it. I was warned against it when I put it in my garden, but it has been slow spreading. I make sure to deadhead the flowers. I have a patch of periwinkle (vinca), a non-native invasive, that I am going to try and replace with *Anemonas-trum canadense*. 🌱



Meadow anemone  
Candace Dressler

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**Oh No, Why Did I  
Plant That?**  
With Master Gardener  
Candace Dressler



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Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website <https://mgottawa.ca/>

## Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



## Trowel Talk team:

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### Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face, gardening questions.

#### Dundonald Park Earth day event

Saturday, 20 April 2024, 10:00 am –2:00 pm

#### Carp Farmers Market

Saturday, 4 May, 11 May 2024, 8:00 am—1:00 pm

#### Parkdale Market

Saturday, 11 May 2024, 12:00 pm—4:00 pm

#### [Friends of the Farm plant sale](#)

Sunday, 12 May 2024, 8:00 am—1:00 pm

#### Ottawa's Farmers Market

Sunday, 12 May 2024, 9:00 am—12:00 pm



### Talks and Events

Tuesday, April 16, 7:00 pm

**Start your own Herb Garden**, Mary Crawford  
[Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society](#)

Tuesday, 16 April, 7:00 pm

**Increasing Your Garden's Benefits While Keeping It Beautiful**, Kelly Noel  
[FCEF Lecture Series](#)

Zoom

Saturday, April 20, 2:00 pm

**Vegetables in Small Spaces**, Judith Cox  
[Cumberland Library](#)

Tuesday, April 30, 7:00 pm

**Your Garden Ecosystem**, Rebecca Last  
[FCEF Lecture Series](#)

Zoom