



MASTER GARDENER

Trowel Talk

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My Foray into Hydroponics

Dale Odorizzi

About fifteen years ago, my good friend and fellow Master Gardener Renai introduced me to her little AeroGarden. It had four pod holes and a different plant growing in each pod. It was in January, so it was nice to see some fresh greens, but I was a little underwhelmed. I had a large garden, and every year I used grow lights to start about 1,000 vegetable, perennial and annual seeds. Why bother with a little AeroGarden?

Times changed and I moved from a large rural property to an in-town condominium. Of course, my grow lights came with me and I continued to start seeds, albeit a lot fewer each year. My grow light stand became a place to store junk and, with great sadness, I gave it away. I still wanted to start my own seeds and decided to try hydroponics. I had seen photos online of tomato plants started hydroponically and they looked amazing. The LED lights of these gardens produce much more light than traditional fluorescent bulbs. There were many types of small hydroponic systems to choose from. I chose a 9-Pod Bounty AeroGarden so I could grow nine plants at once. If using it to grow transplants, you could purchase an insert that would hold 50 plants, while the Harvest models would hold a 24-transplant insert. I later learned the Bounty insert was not available in Canada.

The garden system arrived promptly at the end of



Loving Garden Visitors

Nancy McDonald

*Fluttering, flying,
alighting to delight me
while sipping nectar.*

“The most noteworthy thing about gardeners is that they are always optimistic, always enterprising, and never satisfied. They always look forward to doing something better than they have ever done before.” - Vita Sackville-West, 1892-1962, author & garden designer

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November and was easy to set up. I was eager to get started.



Pepper seedlings grown in a seedling insert on a Harvest Aero Garden

Courtesy of Susan Greer

Seeds grow without using soil. The base of the garden is a reservoir of water. The grow deck covers the reservoir, and a pump regularly comes on to circulate the water. If using pre-seeded pods, soak each pod for an hour or two and put it in one of the holes. To plant your own seeds, soak the “sponge” that looks more like a cork in water for an hour and then plant the seed. Put the sponge in a basket and put the basket in one of the holes in the grow deck. Cover with a grow dome. If you are not using all of the holes, cover the empty holes with plant spacers. My garden came with a “Pod Gourmet Seed Kit”. I quickly planted Thai basil and parsley. I also planted some lettuce seeds I had at home from last year's garden.



Aero garden accessories (left to right) sponge, cage, dome cover, plug

Dale Odorizzi

The basil grew exceptionally well. At first, I harvested a bit at a time and gave some to neighbours. It was producing so much that the neighbours hid when they saw me coming. Although I had never made pesto before, I decided to try my hand at it, and we loved it. I made pesto every week or two to use up my basil. I put it in glass jars and into the freezer.

The booklets that accompanied my garden mentioned growing tomato plants in the set up. I did not believe I could successfully grow tomatoes but wanted to try. Rather than using tomato seeds I had on hand, I ordered pre-planted tomato seeds to give them every chance of success. The seed kits have five or six seeds planted in each cage. Once the tomatoes sprout, it is smart to prune out all but one plant.

After two months, I was eating tomatoes. They were Tiny Tims, and they tasted like tomatoes! The downside of tomatoes is they take up all the room they can get. The tomatoes crowded out the parsley and the lettuce. The basil held its own for a while, but the tomatoes eventually crowded it out. I could raise the light on my Aero Garden to 45 cm above the plant deck. I did this gradually, every time the plants grew close to the lights.



Tomatoes taking all available space. They are garden hogs but so delicious.

Dale Odorizzi

The Garden has a built-in timer for turning the lights on and off. You can set the daily start time for the lights coming on and vary the length of time they are on each day. Your garden also shows when the water level in your reservoir is high, medium or low. A “*Low Water Alert*” shows when the water gets too low. You should keep the water level at full but do not let it overflow. I found that when my tomatoes were producing, I used at least 1 litre of water every day.

Plant food is essential to grow the plants as this is the only way they get nutrition. My starter kit had a small bottle of liquid plant food (4-5-6). I did the math and decided to buy a 1 litre container. My grow system tells me when it is time to add fertilizer (every two weeks).

Algae is a big concern with hydroponic gardens. It is important to cover all the dome holes to keep the light out of the water reservoir. Once per month, coinciding with adding your fertilizer, clean the reservoir. This involves disconnecting the pump and lifting off the plant deck. Have a container handy to sit the deck in. Empty your reservoir and wash it out. Refill the reservoir with fresh, cool water and add the recommended plant food.



Roots are taking up more space and are starting to grow into the pump. Time to trim them by 1/3 and rake your fingers through the roots to untangle

Dale Odorizzi

While you have the plant deck off, examine the roots of your plants. If the roots are getting long or turning brown, trim them. Long roots can get tangled in the pump and damage it. Reassemble your garden and ensure you have sufficient water.

If you are a Facebook user, I suggest you join a hydroponic group. There are ones especially for Canadians. Members are helpful and generous with their knowledge. It is interesting to see what other people are growing—mini cucumbers, peppers, and even green onions. Many of the Facebook posts talk about having multiple hydroponic gardens. The most I saw was someone who said they had forty!

I have not grown tomato transplants for my outdoor containers. Some folks on Facebook complained that whenever they transplanted seedlings into containers, the seedlings died. Helpful members advised that the way to successfully move seedlings from hydroponics to soil was to keep the soil containers very wet for the first week and gradually decrease the water until it was more normal. Remember, the plants have been growing in water and a sudden transition to soil can be damaging to their roots.

My friend Renai has moved into a retirement home and brought her gardens with her. She takes pride in telling me that the cooks often ask for the fresh herbs she grows in her garden. The herbs grow very quickly and benefit from regular pruning. A win-win.

I have enjoyed growing things hydroponically, and if you are looking to do something indoors, I hope this inspires you to give a hydroponic garden a try. 🌱

Tip: Adding a layer of vermiculite over a seed tray helps to prevent damping off, retain moisture and discourages fungus gnats. Adding a layer of fine gravel (e.g. aquarium) to the pots of house plants will also discourage fungus gnats

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan, Agnieszka Keough

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

I was given a really nice, cheerful, orange-flowered kalanchoe, but it doesn't seem to like my space. The leaves, especially the bottom ones, started turning spotty, then brown and falling off, and the whole plant just keeps looking worse and worse. I tried the bathroom window (cool and bright, facing south but not full sun), and the kitchen (a bit warmer but the same light as the bathroom). I don't think I'm overwatering it. Would it do better in a west window? What do kalanchoes like?

Kalanchoes are absolutely cheerful plants when they're happy, but they can be a bit finicky. Unfortunately, brown leaves seem to be a common way they signal their unhappiness. Hopefully one of these possible causes will give you an idea of what is causing issues with your kalanchoe.

Air circulation could be the issue. Kalanchoes can get powdery mildew and a fungal brown leaf spot, both of which will cause brown spots which extend and eventually kill the leaf. Poor air circulation, warmer temperatures, and higher humidity tend to increase the severity of fungal diseases. Kitchens and bathrooms both tend to be warmer and more humid than other rooms in the house, so consider a different location. Putting the plant in a drier, cooler, well-ventilated room and removing any diseased foliage should help with that issue.

Overwatering is a common issue with kalanchoes, as they are succulents, and prefer to dry out between waterings. Too much water can lead to stem rot and leaves turning yellow and brown and falling off. Another possibility is perhaps that it doesn't

like the light. Kalanchoes want a good bright spot, but not too sunny or they can burn, which produces brown leaves. If there's not enough sun, they will get leggy and the bottom leaves may turn brown and fall off.

I have a large older potentilla shrub out front which I feel really needs to be gotten under control this year, as I feel it's too tall and wide for the space. I don't know where to start pruning, though. I don't want to overdo it and harm the plant. I've done a bit in summer, but it never seems to stop blooming, and I feel bad cutting the flowers off. There are a lot of smaller dead twigs underneath which I know should come out, but doing those individually is a big job, and I don't think it would really change the shrub size. How can I deal with this efficiently?

The best time to prune a potentilla (*Dasiphora fruticosa*) is early spring, before it leafs out. Spring pruning has the additional advantage that you can see the structure of the plant and won't be distracted by flowers and foliage. Potentillas can actually be pruned quite hard, even taken to the ground for rejuvenation.

If you don't want to be quite that drastic, what you can do is look at the structure in spring, and thin the shrub by choosing about a third of the thickest, oldest stems to cut out. Look for stems that are crowded and crossing or rubbing on others, particularly. Then cut back the remaining shoots, again by about a third. Take each stem back to a branching point if possible. The final step would be to remove any remaining dead (or diseased) stems, but you may have to wait until a little later to really be able to see which ones are dead. If it recovers well from this year's pruning, but still seems too large to you, you can increase the amount you prune next spring. 🌱

Ants: Tiny Creatures with a Giant Impact

Mary Crawford

This is one of a series of articles on changing how we see bugs



Ant at sunset

Shihasnalil, courtesy of [Pixabay](#), [Free for use license](#)

Mention the word “ants” and what comes to mind?

Little piles of excavated dirt between the patio stones, a scurry of activity underneath a displaced stone, unwelcome guests on the kitchen counter. We sometimes wonder what to think about these creatures. Do we need to take action? Will the ants ruin our garden? Make the food unfit to eat?

It's a relief to know that ants don't carry disease, and most leave our plants alone. Beyond that, what impact do ants have on our world? You might be surprised!

Who They Are

Ants have been around for 150 million years, outlasting the dinosaurs and predating modern humans by millions of years. At the apex of social organization, they are eusocial, meaning the colony is all-important, almost as if the colony is the individual and the ants are cells within it, each working toward a common goal.

Worldwide, there are more than 16,000 species and counting. There are army ants that battle everything in their midst, trap-jaw ants you don't want to be bitten by, stinging invader fire ants, leaf-cutter ants that feed off fungi, trapeze ants that glide through the forest, black, red, brown and green ants, even ants with iridescent skin.

Ants are almost exclusively female. The few males that exist have one sole purpose: to fertilize the queen. The sister ants forage for food, clean the nest, rear the young, and protect the colony.

In Canada, fewer than 200 species are native. Many of those we see in eastern Ontario are field, pavement or carpenter ants.

Mutualism at Work

One of the most common ants in our backyard is the field ant (*Formica* spp). Field ants nest in soil and are black or reddish brown. Those of us with peonies know them well from their furious activity on the unopened flower buds in the spring. They are lapping up the buds' sugary coating. Not only does this cause no harm to the peony, but the ants also actively protect the flower buds from predation by caterpillars. It's a win-win for the peony, a fine example of mutualistic support between species.

Another example of mutualism was demonstrated in a study in Michigan showing how the black cherry tree (*Prunus serotina*) timed the nectar production from its extrafloral nectaries to attract the western thatching ant (*Formica obscuripes*) (D. Tilman, 1978). Extrafloral nectaries are special glands that can be found on many parts of the plant including the leaves, stems, and petioles. They exude a sugary liquid (nectar) meant for a different group of visi-

tors – ants and other beneficial pests. The presence of the ants kept down the larvae of the eastern tent caterpillar and reduced defoliation. Where more than one colony and one tree were involved, a “green island” of healthy trees was formed.

Pavement ants (*Tetramorium caespitum*) bring up the soil between the patio stones or cracks in the sidewalk. You may have noticed occasional swarming, which indicates a battle for territory and lasts only a few hours. Pavement ants feed on dead and living insects, aphid honeydew, and small seeds.

Cleaning up

Finding carpenter ants (*Campanotus* spp.) inside one’s house can produce anxiety, and it’s true that they can damage buildings. Outside they are incredibly helpful, chewing up wood and cleaning the natural world. Pest Control Canada acknowledges this when it calls carpenter ants “the most destructive insect in Canada” and “one of the most valuable insects we have on earth.”

The presence of one or two carpenter ants in a house could simply indicate the presence of scouts foraging for food, but be sure to follow up to ensure there is no nest.

Spreading Plants Around

Another genus, *Aphaenogaster*, is especially noteworthy for its dispersal of seeds of Ontario’s native forest understory plants. Trilliums (*Trillium* spp.), trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), Dutchman’s breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) and bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) owe much to these ants for having been planted within the eastern deciduous forests.

Here’s how it works. The seeds of a bloodroot plant, for example, drop seeds from their pod with a sweet gelatinous coating known as an elaiosome. This coating is not needed by the seed itself but is very appealing to the ant, who picks it up and hauls it home to the nest.

Once the seed has been licked clean, it is taken by a worker to the ant trash site, 3 to 6 m from the nest.

This trash site is rich in nutrients from leaf litter, insect skeletons and so on—kind of like our backyard composters. There the seed sits until it germinates and, voila, a new plant!



The fallen seeds of the bloodroot with sticky white elaiosomes attached.

Kelly Noel



Bloodroot in full bloom. This plant owes much to seed dispersal by ants.

E.P. Power

It is estimated that more than half the understory plant life in our forests owes its placement to the work of ants.

Soil Engineers

With their underground activity, tunnelling, feeding, and nesting, ants have a significant impact on soil chemistry and physical properties. They improve soil texture and increase filtration. They concentrate nutrients in their nest areas and trash sites. This is likely a key reason why grass in fields grazed on by cattle has been observed to recover much more quickly where ants were present underground.

Inspiring on many Levels

The ants we have around us provide many benefits to the ecosystem and to our plants. They protect from predators, disperse seeds, clean up detritus, aerate the soil, and add nutrients. They do all this with such energy and style it is little wonder humans have been fascinated by ants over the centuries.

From the fierce Myrmidon fighters of Greek mythology (a tribe transformed from ants into people by Zeus), to cultural values shaped by the astonishing ant work ethic, to stories of consolation from simply watching them work, ants provide an impressive and ongoing legacy.

A children's story puts it simply: "*The elephant learns respect and humility from the ants, learning not to stomp on their nests and coming to understand that, though tiny, these creatures have a giant impact*". 🌱

Tip: *As the snow melts its time to think about removing plant winter protection. Wait for snow to melt and the forecast to be clear of deep freezes. Remove mulch protecting plants, once it's thawed, to prevent crown rot for perennials and branch rot on shrubs and trees. On a mild cloudy day take off wraps and covers. It can be hot and humid under covers.*

Land Acknowledgement

Claire McCaughey

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton and its sixty members acknowledge that they live in, garden on, and help to care for the land on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation. This nation has lived on and cared for this land since time immemorial. We wish to honour their long and continuing history on this land by our ongoing role to help the public and home gardeners to care for the land, the water, the plants, and the natural resources which we are all privileged to share.

Indigenous Gardens at the University of Ottawa: Honouring the Unceded Territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation

Claire McCaughey

In the past few years, two Indigenous Gardens have been created at the University of Ottawa (uOttawa). You will find one at the Social Sciences Faculty, established in 2021 and the other at the Faculty of Medicine, established in 2024 on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (September 30).

The Indigenous Garden at the Social Sciences Faculty

This garden is installed at the physical heart of the main campus of uOttawa. Planted at the front of the Social Sciences Faculty building, the garden is the result of a close collaboration between uOttawa's Faculty of Social Sciences, Indigenous Affairs, the Mashkawaziwogamig Indigenous Resource Centre, and members of the Algonquin community. The garden is seen to demonstrate the growing relation-

ship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on campus as well as to make space for Indigenous communities on campus.

Plants of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation at the Social Sciences Faculty Indigenous Garden

To date, the Social Sciences Faculty garden includes five plants that are indigenous to the territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation, each of which has traditional cultural and medicinal importance. These plants may already be familiar to many gardeners in Ottawa as they are beautiful, sought-after native plants for home gardens.

Below is a description of each of the five plants which are growing throughout the garden. Each description includes three names for each plant – the name in the Algonquin language (Anishinaabemowin), the common name, and the botanical name. Permanent plaques containing these various names for each plant as well as an image of the plant are installed on the walls of the garden below the benches and therefore are very visible to students who sit or congregate there.



View of benches and signage along one side of Social Sciences Faculty Indigenous Garden
Claire McCaughey

Miskwàbigiminaganj / Pagoda Dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*)

Pagoda dogwood is a large multi-stemmed shrub (or small tree) with horizontal branches. This shrub grows to seven or eight metres tall. It has white

flower clusters in early spring followed by dark blue berries in late summer. It prefers partial shade conditions and therefore is a very good choice for planting in a large woodland garden or even a small shady garden. The inner bark of this shrub is used as medicine by Indigenous peoples across Canada.



Pagoda dogwood beside sign at Social Sciences Faculty Indigenous Garden
Claire McCaughey

Nibà-ayamiye anàganashk / Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*)

Christmas fern is an evergreen or semi-evergreen fern with dark green leathery fronds. It has a strong presence throughout the seasons making an excellent groundcover. It prefers partial shade and moist soil but will tolerate dry soil once established. It grows to about 40-50 cm. Its roots are used in traditional medicine.

Anàganiwashkòns / Northern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*)

Northern maidenhair fern is a delicate and elegant

deciduous fern with wiry black stems growing to about 40-50 cm. It prefers moist but well-drained soil in partial shade and therefore is very suited to woodland gardens. Its fronds have been used traditionally to treat a variety of diseases and disorders.



Close-up photo of plaque for Northern Maidenhair Fern

Claire McCaughey

Nabagashk / Yellow trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

Yellow trout lily is a small, ephemeral spring bulb which comes up very early in spring, after the snow is gone. It has yellow flowers and spotted green leaves. Once it has finished flowering, it disappears underground for the rest of the season. Yellow trout lily flowers can be seen along many forest pathways in the National Capital Region in early spring and are very appreciated as one of the earliest flowers. The leaves are used in traditional medicine for a variety of ailments.

Pāgwadakamig-wābigon / Large-leaved aster (*Eurybia macrophylla*)

Large-leaved (or big-leaved) aster is a late-summer perennial. It has clusters of flowers with lavender (or occasionally white) rays and yellow centres. It grows best in partial to full shade and moist soil and therefore is often included in woodland gardens. It can also be used to naturalize in large gardens. It grows to about 50 cm. The root of this plant has been used as a remedy for various illnesses.

The Indigenous Garden at the Faculty of Medicine

This garden was dedicated late last year. The garden is envisaged as a space for reconciliation as well as fostering a greater understanding of Indigenous traditions and their contributions to health and wellbeing. It includes a green space just outside the faculty building with raised beds. Some of the plants included in this garden are spruce, cedar, mint, rosemary, and sweetgrass. Once the plantings have been completed in this garden, as well as the Social Sciences Faculty garden, these will be places where gardeners will be able to visit and learn more about plants important to this territory and to Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada.



Sweetgrass (also known as *Hierochloa odorata* or *Anthoxanthum nitens*) growing at the First Nations Garden at the Montreal Botanical Garden

Claire McCaughey

Conclusion

As we are now approaching the time to plan gardening activities for the spring, please consider including some of these plants in your garden as a way of honouring the Algonquin Anishinabeg territory on which we live and where we garden and care for the land. Some of the plants included in the Faculty of Medicine Indigenous Garden will be profiled further in forthcoming articles with information on how to grow them and where they might be best used in the garden.

All the plants mentioned above can be purchased at specialized native plant nurseries, large well-stocked garden centres, and special events (such as the Friends of the Farm sale or the Fletcher Wildlife Garden sale). They can also be grown from seed (or spore in the case of ferns) at very low cost. Free seed is also widely available from the Ottawa Wildflower Seed Library through their events. Remember: never try to dig out or take any of these plants from the wild.

Master Gardeners provide advice on how best to establish and grow plants such as these in home gardens or other locations. We provide advice tables for the public at many local farmers markets and horticulture events held from spring to fall. 🌱

Correction

February 2025, page 3 caption: the botanical name of dwarf spirea should be *Spirea* sp. Not *Spiraea salicifolia*

Register here

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Helplines are monitored daily.

Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for identification.

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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Letters to editor: newsletter@mgottawa.ca

Banner Photograph: . Willow branches, S.R. Bicket



Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face gardening questions.

Market locations can be found on the calendars of the Lanark and Ottawa-Carleton websites

[Ottawa Home & Garden Show,](#)

12:00 pm to 5:00 pm, Thursday, March 20

12:00 pm to 5:00 pm, Friday, March 21

10:00 am to 7:00 pm, Saturday, March 22

10:00 am to 5:00 pm, Sunday, March 23

[Pontiac Seedy Saturday,](#) 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

March 29



Talks and Events

Seed Starting for the upcoming season

Judith Cox

Tuesday, March 18, 7:30 pm

[Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society](#)

Wildscaping: Wild Planting in a Strong Design

Lee Ann Smith

Tuesday, March 18, 7:00 pm ZOOM

www.friendsofthefarm.ca

Seasonal Colour using Native Plants

Candace Dressler

Wednesday, March 19, 7:00 pm

[Kemptville Horticultural Society](#)

Growing Vegetables in Small Spaces

Judith Cox

Thursday March 20, 7:30 pm

[Nepean Horticultural Society](#)

Bullies, Thugs and Sneaks

Rebecca Last

Monday, March 24, 7pm

[Pembroke Horticultural Society](#)

New York's High Line Park: Bold Vision, Creative Design

Mary Crawford

Tuesday, March 25, 7:00 pm

[Ottawa Horticultural Society](#)

The Urban Potager – A field to table experience

Odette McIntyre

Tuesday, April 1, 7:00 pm

[Kanata-March Horticultural Society](#)

Natures' Turf: Cultivating Eco-friendly Lawns

Maryanne Ambroziak

Tuesday, April 1, 7:00 pm. ZOOM

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How to live with what lives in your garden

Judith Cox

Wednesday April 2, 7:30 pm

[Greely Gardeners](#)

Purple Carrots, Honeybees and Magic; gardening with children

Judith Cox

Saturday, April 5, 2:00 pm

[Ottawa Public Library - Cumberland Branch](#)

High Performance, Low Maintenance Plants

Lee Ann Smith

Saturday, April 12, 2:00 pm

[Ottawa Public Library – Nepean Centerpointe Branch](#)

Culinary Delights with Herbs and Edible Flowers

Nancy McDonald

Tuesday, April 15, 7:00 pm

[Ottawa Public Library – Orleans Branch](#)

Sowing the Inspired Garden

Rob Stuart

Tuesday, April 15, 7:00 pm ZOOM

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