

Star-Telegram

Put your smartphone to work in the garden

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If you have a smartphone, you have a green thumb.

Or could have a green thumb. We realize that no amount of technology is going to render the hapless gardener into W. Atlee Burpee, but having a convenient reference at your fingertips -- or thumb tips -- can't hurt your chances of growing something green, either to look at or to eat.

Many gardeners, despite their penchant for nature and the great outdoors, are drawn to modern conveniences, such as smartphones and the Internet. Why else would searches on Yahoo! for the phrase "vegetable garden" be up a whopping 183 percent this week, the week when most of the country begins to thaw and flower?

Searches for "container gardening," a growing trend (excuse the double-meaning), are up 133 percent, and "raised garden beds" are up 115 percent. The searches for "vegetable seeds" are up 458 percent, indicating a plethora of cucumbers and squash in a couple of months.

Who is doing most of those searches? More than half -- 55 percent -- of searches for the word "gardening" come from women, according to Heather Cabot, Yahoo! Web Life Editor. And most of those women searching for gardening come from, in order, Texas, North Carolina and Virginia.

So it looks like Texas women -- and not a few men with dirt under their nails and trowels on their tool belts -- are looking for online help when it comes to tilling, planting, weeding and harvesting.

With Cabot's help, we've rounded up 10 smartphone gardening apps, checking them out to see if they can indeed help us cultivate our crops. Download the app of your choice onto your phone and keep it with you as you weed your furrows, stroll the aisles of the nursery or hike in the woods.

Herbs+

"This is a simple and clean design and gives the user useful information on planting herbs, harvesting and storing, as well as cooking tips and medicinal uses," says Cabot, who is eager to get back to the garden. "It got me really excited to start growing my own basil this summer." \$2.99; for iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad and Android.

Bonnie Plants Grow & Go Together

This one's good for newbies and is useful while shopping at the nursery. P. Allen Smith, host of his own syndicated public television show on gardening, helps users learn the nitty-gritty details on 50 vegetables and herbs, provides 50 recipes for said herbs and helps you organize your garden by season. He also describes projects such as compost bins, cold frames and vegetable and herb container garden combos for those with not a lot of space. Free; for iPhone and iPod Touch; see www.bonnieplants.com.

Dirr's Tree and Shrub Finder

A professor of horticulture at the University of Georgia, Michael A. Dirr has assembled a directory of woody plants based on his seminal *The Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* that makes it easy to identify 9,400 plants; there are 72 searchable criteria, ranging from hardiness zones to water requirements to fall colors. It's an interesting app, endlessly enlightening, but one thing: It is comparatively as expensive as a black walnut sapling. At \$14.99 from the App Store, this one is mainly for serious landscapers and horticulture students. For iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch.

The Essential Garden Guide

"This one is a great primer for planting fruits and vegetables in your garden," concludes Cabot. "It's easy to navigate and also offers very in-depth content on the history and background of various species." Not sure if you can grow grapes? Wonder how kohlrabi would do in the shade? This one is for you. \$1.99; for iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad and Android.

Botany Buddy

Search quickly through a database of 2,000 native and ornamental plants, including cactuses and other succulents, which might be handy for our region. Look up plants from A to Z or plug in the common or botanical name (if you know it) and find not just text but images detailing parts of the plant, not just the plant. You can't just download this one from the App Store; it's big, so you need to download it into a computer first. And it's pricey at \$9.99. For iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch.

Pocket Garden

Unsure as to when to plant those green beans? This app, happily specializing in veggies, and only veggies, spells it out for you. You can track your success by making notes as to how things are working. And for an app that's less than a dollar, the publishers are eager to add value by continuing to expand the seed database, add to the zone information and, new now, let you select from "seed" or "starters" for maximum correct advice. 99 cents; for iPhone and iPad.

Garden Pro

"This is a great visual reference tool," Cabot says. "It lets you access instant information for 750 flowers and plants. This seems like a very useful resource while you're shopping at a nursery or admiring someone else's garden." Not only that, the app helps you keep track of your own tasks, pests and diseases, and you can add your own photos to help recall just what the heck that was you planted. "For each flower and plant, there's a chart that shows its season and how much light and water it needs to grow, plus a guide to pests," Cabot adds. \$1.99; for iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad.

Arbor Day Tree Identification Guide

This one is subtitled "What Tree Is That?," and usually, that's a pretty good question. If you don't know your live oaks from a maple, this app gives names to your backyard forest in no time, using leaf size and shape, branch structure and other characteristics of 250 North American trees. Dazzle your golfing buddies by pointing out that you just got back into the fairway thanks to a strategically placed hackberry. No cell coverage? No worries, it's stored in your phone. \$4.95; for iPhone.

Flower Garden

Let's say you really, really don't have a green thumb, or you have no time, place or need to actually grow something. But you want the experience of it, anyway. This addictive site lets you "grow" a virtual bouquet that you can send to someone via e-mail. But don't underwater it, or it will suffer, just like a real flower. Some bloom immediately, while others require care each day for more than a week. \$1.99; for iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch.

Burpee Garden Coach

First of all, the name of the seed company did not come from a "burpless" cucumber it developed. It's the name of the founder, the aforementioned W. Atlee Burpee, surely one of the coolest names in gardening, or anywhere. Now the seed king has released an app that, among other things, sends you text messages with tips throughout the growing season; you get local weather forecasts and advice on how it could impact your garden; you can "tag" your produce and have specific information about it sent; and you can keep a journal and rate your plants' progress. Free; text your ZIP code to 80998 to sign up.

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