

Some inspiration for the gardening season

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Given the damp and dreary April endured by this corner of the planet, the proverbial May flowers should be popping up like NDP MPs in Quebec.

Sadly, at my own home, what's more in evidence are muddy, barren patches and a knotted tangle of Creeping Charlie marching purposefully across the lawn. Hope lies close at hand, though, in the form of a slightly warmer than normal spring and summer and a huge offering of outdoor plants from a variety of retailers.

If you need a dose of inspiration to get gardening, take a visit to the Toronto Botanical Garden's (www.torontobotanicalgarden.ca) annual sale, which runs until 5 p.m. Saturday. There you'll find master gardeners offering growing tips and information on plant and colour trends. Farther afield is the Canadian Tulip Festival (www.tulipfestival.ca) in Ottawa, which runs until May 23.

Urban dwellers can also get great information at LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests, www.yourleaf.org), a non-profit organization that works to protect and improve the urban forest and oversees a native species planting program and sells Native Garden Kits that attract either songbirds or butterflies. The window for ordering a kit for spring has closed, but you can order now for a fall planting. Two sizes are available, covering from 25 to 64 square feet, which costs \$125 and \$325.

If you love fresh cut flowers but shudder at the thought of budgeting for a weekly visit to the florist, consider planning a cutting garden this summer. All you need is some space and a bit of know-how, which can be found at the Canadian Gardening website, www.canadiangardening.com. Just search for "cutting garden."

Whatever area of your outdoor space you decide to tackle, you want to ensure that you're working from a good base. Turf Revolution is an all-natural landscaping product company that sells organic options for improving lawns, as well as both vegetable and flower gardens. The entire line is free from animal by-products, manure, synthetics or processed human sewage.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

PC's Simply Salad Bowl's al fresco mix.

As a pet owner, one product that caught my eye was Salt Stopper, a naturally-mined calcium magnesium sulphate that the company says neutralizes road salt and pet urine and can be used as a spot treatment for areas damaged by either.

Because I prefer not to water the lawn and garden, I also like the sound of Time Sav'r Topdresser, an organic pelletized compost made from leaf and yard trimmings which is free of weed seeds. It increases the soil's water-holding capacity, which increases drought tolerance. For more information and a list of retailers and www.turfrevolution.com.

President's Choice lawn and garden line has been expanding for the last few years as it tries to carve out a niche as the go-to place for new products (www.pc.ca). This year's selection, which should be rolling into stores this week, does not disappoint.

Those who missed out on the spring-blooming Bloomerang lilac, which begins reblooming in mid-summer, is back and selling at about \$30 for a shrub that grows to about five feet. Two new plants are a lovely gingery-orange Huecherella (about \$10 for a five-inch pot) and a velvety-black petunia (\$2.99 each or \$2.50 if you buy a flat of 10 or more).

My top pick, however, may just have to be the 12-inch Simply Salad Bowls, which are pre-planted with salad greens in three mixes. Not only do they make a pleasing outdoor arrangement, but you can pluck a few leaves from one to make a fresh salad. To that end, I'd plan to buy three or more so I could rotate harvesting. In doing so, I'm told that at least three full harvests could be gotten from a single bowl.

Having an outdoor watering station would also add to the convenience of using these for summer suppers on the deck. Home Depot's spring/summer catalogue has an image of a DIY water station, directions for which can be found on their new online channel with easy-to-execute projects. Go to www.homedepot.ca/knowhow to find directions.

Lounging and entertaining on summer evenings would be further enhanced with clever solar-powered planters from PC Home. These white resin planters, which are 18-inches in diameter and just under 20-inches high, can be used to hold plants and illuminate walkways. I love the idea of using them as ice-buckets to keep summer beverages cool throughout the evening. They sell for \$85. If you don't find them this weekend at your local Loblaws store, don't panic — in some areas they may not arrive until late May.

If your idea of summer gardening is to loll in a lounge, you may do well to investigate summer flora that doesn't require too much work. The first issue of Rona's new online magazine, Ronamag (www.ronamag.ca) has some good suggestions, along with a series of tips for the eco-conscious gardener.

You can read Vicky's On the House blog at www.thestar.blogs.com/onthehouse. Contact Vicky Sanderson at vswriter@sympatico.ca and follow her on Twitter [@vickysanderson](https://twitter.com/vickysanderson).