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internet reviews

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR YARD WITH GARDENING AND PLANTS WEBSITES

BY JENNIFER A. BARTLETT

INTERIM ASSOCIATE DEAN OF TEACHING, LEARNING, & RESEARCH • UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY LIBRARIES

"Let us enlighten, then, our earthly burdens
By going back to school, this time in gardens
That burn no hotter than the summer day.
By birth and growth, ripeness, death and decay,
By goods that bind us to all living things,
Life of our life, the garden lives and sings."

-- Wendell Berry, "A Speech to the Garden Club of America," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 21, 2009,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/09/28/a-speech-to-the-garden-club-of-america>

Whether you are an experienced master gardener or a novice struggling to keep an indoor houseplant alive, there are thousands of websites and blogs offering ideas, suggestions, and answers to tricky gardening questions. In this column, we'll scratch only the surface as we dig into the best websites to help you and your patrons develop a green thumb.

General Gardening Information



American Horticultural Society **<https://www.ahsgardening.org>**

One of the oldest gardening organizations in the United States, the AHS is a terrific resource for all gardeners, regardless of experience level. While some content is limited to subscribers, this beautifully designed website is home to some free resources available to everyone, including zone maps, garden directories, lists of gardening organiza-

tions, calendars of regional events, and podcasts. Non-members can also sign up to receive a newsletter with seasonal planting advice.

Society membership comes with a subscription and access to the complete digital archives of the AHS magazine *The American Gardener*, which is published six times a year.



National Gardening Association **<https://garden.org>**

Founded in 1971 as Gardens for All, the National Gardening Association (NGA) is an amazingly comprehensive and social clearinghouse for educa-

tional gardening and plant information. Geared toward home gardeners, the NGA website offers hundreds of resources about vegetables, herbs, fruits, trees, lawns, flowers, and houseplants. The Learning Library is comprised of plant care and food gardening guides, weed and pest control libraries, a series of five free "Learning Garden" horticultural classes, a gardening dictionary, gardening tutorial videos, thousands of articles, a searchable Q&A knowledge base, and archived episodes of "All Things Plants," a gardening podcast. The Plants Database includes nearly 750,000 plants and over 550,000 images, searchable by plant name and characteristics, and browsable by common name and genus. The Tools and Apps section offers a planting calendar, materials calculators, hardiness zone map, calendar of gardening events, user-submitted photos (with contests!), and a list of group seed swaps. The weekly newsletter features articles, tips, ideas, DIY videos, and photos.

A particularly useful feature of the NGA website is the extensive involvement of community users (accounts are free to create). Online forums are frequently updated with member questions and advice about topics from annuals to wildflowers, and members can also post blog entries and submit local events to the gardening calendar.

NGA also publishes practical gardening books, and its annual National Gardening Survey is a comprehensive market research report for the lawn, garden, and nursery industries focusing on industry trends, consumer profiles, emerging markets, and retail sales.

Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) **<https://www.rhs.org.uk>**



The RHS, which received its Royal Charter in 1809, is the United Kingdom's leading gardening charity and an amazing source of gardening information for members and non-members alike. While aimed at gardeners in the UK, most of the site's information can be helpful to any gardener. For example, the "Find a Plant"

feature suggests plants based on user-supplied criteria including soil type, amount of sunlight, level of moisture, and so on. The Advice section offers hundreds of topics including pruning guides; common problems; pests; weeds; lawn care; soil, compost, and mulches; and growing guides for indoor and outdoor plants. The month-by-month calendar lists common tasks that need to be accomplished during the month, and the biweekly RHS Gardening Podcast offers seasonal advice, Q&A, inspirational ideas, and behind-the-scenes reports from flower and gardening shows.

GardenGuides **<https://www.gardenguides.com>**



For a frequently updated collection of interesting and useful gardening advice articles, check out Leaf Group's GardenGuides. Topics covered recently include "Succulents:

This Year's Rock Star Plants," "Mulch: What It Is and What It Does," "How to Screen Your Yard Drains," and "Best Plants for a Shade Garden." The site is keyword-searchable, and browsable by category, including Flowers, Lawn, Produce, Trees, and Structures. Other features include an interactive Hardiness Zone map and Garden Planner. The Hardiness Zone map allows users to enter a zip code to determine the correct zone (for Kentucky, Zones 6 and 7) and returns lists of recommended annuals and perennials, a planting guide, and landscaping ideas. The site is ad-supported and only some of the freelance contributors list extensive gardening experience, but articles are well-researched and lead to suggestions for further reading.



The Old Farmer's Almanac **<https://www.almanac.com>**

No list of gardening websites would be complete with The Old Farmer's Almanac, THE source for gardening, farming, weather, and general information since 1792. The website version offers sections on weather, astronomy, calendars, recipes, and home and health; the gardening section features all the free content you need to get started with a vegetable garden. Helpful tools include a vegetable planting calendar, list of gardening tasks by month, a subscription-based Garden Planner (with a seven-day free trial), how-to videos and articles, accompanying iPhone app, location-specific planting dates, a free beginner's garden guide, and a podcast series. And check out the "Canning and Pickling" tips and recipes in the Food section to help process all the vegetables from your garden!

Gardening and Landscaping in Kentucky

USDA Cooperative Extension Offices

<http://extension.ca.uky.edu>

<http://kysu.edu/academics/cafs/s/cooperative-extension/>



In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act established a system of cooperative extension services connected to the nation's land-grant institutions for the purpose of educating the public about agriculture, home economics, economic development, and other

related subjects. Today, a treasure trove of information about all things horticultural is available from county extension offices.

Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the Cooperative Extension System has offices in all U.S. states and territories, each staffed by one or more experts who provide information to their local communities. Kentucky's two land-grant universities, the University of Kentucky and Kentucky State University, host cooperative extension services.

UK's College of Agriculture, Food and Environment Extension Service (<http://extension.ca.uky.edu>) publishes online brochures and videos for home growers at <http://www.uky.edu/hort/home-horticulture>. The site also includes information about Kentucky's Master Gardener Program, a volunteer program involving horticultural education and volunteer projects such as exhibits, teaching, and community garden projects.

While not offering home gardening resources, Kentucky State University's Cooperative Extension page (<https://kysu.edu/academics/cafs/s/cooperative-extension/>) hosts a collection of farming-related publications, program announcements, and 4-H resources.

UK and KSU jointly administer extension offices with local experts, programming and information in each of the state's 120 counties. See <http://extension.ca.uky.edu/county> for a map of offices by county name and district.



The Garden Club of Kentucky

<http://www.gardenclubky.org>

Headquartered in Paris, Kentucky and an affiliate chapter of the National Garden Clubs, the Garden Club of Kentucky aims to "promote interest in and knowledge of horticulture, gardening, garden therapy, and youth gardening; to encourage beautification of home, community, and state; and to encourage appreciation and conservation of wildflowers, wildlife, forests, wilderness areas, and other natural resources and cooperate with other agencies promoting these interests."

While much of The Garden Club's website is devoted to its own organizational activities and information, there is also some content for non-members. The statewide Calendar of Events is regularly updated, and the sections on Floral Design, Native Alternatives, and Pollination offer useful information.



Kentucky Gardener

<http://www.statebystategardening.com/ky/>

Billed as "Kentucky's own guide to great gardening and landscaping," the Kentucky Gardener website is an attractive, well-designed destination to find gardening articles, videos, and other information about gardening in the Commonwealth. Largely comprised of archived articles from the companion magazine (re-grouped by popular topics, such as shade, perennials, roses, fruit, etc.), the website also includes a calendar of events and special articles from guest bloggers. Unfortunately, much of the content on the website does not appear to be regularly updated at this point, but the existing content is still useful.

Kentucky Gardener magazine is published by The Team Advertising and Publishing, which currently publishes gardening magazines for 21 states and numerous state-specific and region-specific gardening books.

Plant Identification and Information



USDA PLANTS Database

<https://plants.usda.gov>

The PLANTS database ("Plant List of Accepted Nomenclature, Taxonomy & Symbols") is a comprehensive one-stop repository for standardized information about plants in the U.S., including scientific and common names, species descriptions, characteristics, location maps, images, and links for further information. Users can search for a list of plants in a particular state, learn about regional wetland and endangered plants, and find alternative crops suitable for small-scale farming.

Downloadable Fact Sheets and Plant Guides provide descriptions of a plant, its uses, and cultural recommendations, and are available in PDF or Word format. The searchable PLANTS Image Gallery contains more than 50,000 photos and line drawings of U.S. plants.

PLANTS is maintained by the National Plant Data Team, part of the USDA's National Resources Conservation Service.



Southeastern Flora: Southeastern US Plant Identification Resource

<http://www.southeasternflora.com/index.php>

With over 2,300 species and nearly 53,500 images, Southeastern Flora is a great place to start when identifying native or naturalized wildflowers, trees, shrubs, and vines. Site users enter traits about the plant, such as flower color, type of plant, and leaf type and arrangement. Optional search fields include species, common, and family names, if known. The visual photo search results then help users narrow down their specific plant. The Glossary helps with unfamiliar terms (an herb, for example, is technically defined as "a plant lacking a persistent woody stem"). The list of resources offers links to outside websites and a somewhat dated list of books for further reading. A particularly interesting feature is a list of suggested equipment for outdoor enthusiasts including gear, apparel, field guides, botany equipment, and more, from Forestry Suppliers, an outfitting company specializing in horticulture, grounds maintenance, science education, surveying, etc.

Dave's Garden Plant Files

<https://davesgarden.com/guides/pf/>

Dave's Garden

Founded in 2000, Dave's Garden claims to have "the largest plant database in the world," and one visit to the site might lead you to believe it. It features over 200,000 expert-reviewed files on plants, bugs, and

birds in its PlantFiles section, which is searchable by plant name and zip code. Results can be filtered by plant height, preferred sun exposure, hardiness, bloom color, foliage color, plant spacing, bloom time, foliage type, bloom characteristics, and a number of other variables.

A core strength of Dave's Garden is its active community of members, which is a terrific source of advice, ideas, and recommendations. In addition to contributing comments and images to the PlantFiles databases, users also share information through the Garden Watchdog feature, which allows users to look up nearly 8,000 mail order companies and review submitted comments about plant quality and trustworthiness. PlantScout locates vendors that sell particular plants, seed, and bulbs; and TradeTracker is a real-time tool for locating and keeping up with plant, bulb, and seed trades.



Rodale Institute My First Garden

<http://rodaleinstitute.org/myfirstgarden>

"Healthy Soil = Healthy Food = Healthy People:" this motto was the cornerstone of J.I. Rodale's work in American organic agriculture. Founded in 1947 to explore alternative methods of gardening without chemical pesticides, the Rodale Institute today continues its founders' original mission through farmer training, consumer education, and research.

The "My First Garden" website begins the education process early by helping teachers work school gardens into their curriculum. Five sequential lesson plans incorporate video tutorials, activities, print resources, and suggested books, and include "Where Food Comes From," "How Seeds Grow," "Planting a Garden," "Harvesting and Tasting," and "Visit a Farm." Designed primarily for preschool and kindergarten, the lessons can be adapted for grades 1-5 as well.



Kids Gardening

<https://kidsgardening.org>

Since 1982, the KidsGardening organization has been working on initiatives focused on the school gardening movement. Its website not only offers information about current grants and programs, but also hosts extensive free resources for teachers. The "Educator Resources" section offers lesson plans, activities for indoor and outdoor gardening, crafts, early childhood education resources, and tips on designing school garden programs. "Gardening Toolbox" is a collection of useful and interesting articles, garden activities, and growing guides for particular plants.

The Growing Ideas blog is a good place to find news about current school projects and grant programs, and the monthly KidsGarden Newsletter has additional thematic K-12 lesson plans, seasonal gardening tips, ideas for activities, and grant opportunity news.

My First Garden

<http://extension.illinois.edu/firstgarden/index.cfm>



Aimed toward fourth graders and available in both English and Spanish, the University of Illinois Extension's "My First Garden" is a fun, easy-to-

read website appropriate for both educators and students. From gardening basics to a picture gallery of student-submitted finished gardens, this website is a solid introduction to horticulture basics. Also, see a terrific collection of similar educational modules at <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/state/programarea.cfm?ProgramAreaID=5>, such as "The Great Plant Escape," "Let's Talk About Insects," and "Dr. Arbor Talks Trees."

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