

Flora & Fauna

The Wonders of the Window Box

Maybe it's just me, but there's something about a house with flower boxes beneath its windows that says, "Come in, the coffee's on." I particularly love these perky container gardens late in the season, when a variety of blooms spill over the sides, intrude on window frames and show off a glorious riot of colors. If window boxes appeal to you as well, invest your energies in the installation process and you'll have done a majority of the work needed for attention-getting window gardens.

First, size does matter when it comes to these architectural statements, so don't begin your project until you measure your windows. Selecting window boxes that measure an inch or two longer on either side of your sills won't present a problem, but if your container is not as wide as your ledge, designers say you'll never be aesthetically satisfied with the finished result, so be forewarned.

After you've taken your measurements, head for your favorite nursery, Wal-Mart, Target or home gardening center to check out your container options. Though basic window boxes are most often fabricated of wood or plastic, you can find unique containers made of more exotic materials. Adventurous gardeners feel perfectly comfortable creating a box out of anything that's long and deep enough to plant and hang. Whatever material you select, you'll make your future watering and general plant care duties ever so much easier if you elect a box with a built-in water reservoir.

In addition to drainage, the weight of a window box (once it's filled with soil, plants and water) should have a direct bearing on the brackets you use to support the boxes. Strong brackets, fitted at equal intervals, may be the single most important insurance you give yourself, so don't skimp on them. As a rule of thumb, one bracket per two feet of window box should do the trick.

According to window box pros, you can make the entire job perpetually easy by avoiding planting anything directly into your window boxes. Use the secret experienced garden designers employ: plant blooms into a liner. This will make the job a breeze to construct and maintain because you can do the most complicated work at the comfort and height of your potting table. Fill liners with soil that comes within an inch or two of the box lip, add nutrients, bury the plants, then lower the liner into the box and water liberally. For long window boxes, you may wish to use two liners.

When it comes to the topic of which plants look best in window boxes, some of the best advice we found was this: Pick flowers with powerful colors for the greatest impact and don't be afraid to ask for recommendations from nursery staff. Their expertise could mean the difference between a mediocre and a spectacular first effort.

Once your gardens are established, practice good plant hygiene by plucking out dead blooms regularly, fertilize according to plant directions and you're good to go.

When your growing season is over, simply lift out the plastic liners, clean and store them. When spring arrives, you'll be ready to start all over again with a more ambitious design plan than the year before because you, my friend, are an experienced window box pro.

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Household Tips: Food to the Rescue

- Add salt to the water before boiling eggs to prevent shells from cracking and breaking
- To get the greatest amount of lemon juice from the fruit, remove from the fridge, then roll on a hard surface *before* squeezing it
- Remove burned food from a skillet by boiling dishwashing soap and water on the stovetop
- Coat plastic containers with nonstick spray so tomato-based contents don't dye the plastic red
- Accidentally over-salted a dish while cooking it? Drop in a peeled potato to absorb the excess
- Get a better looking, glossier piecrust by brushing it with egg white before baking it
- Aluminum foil-wrapped celery keeps stalks fresh for weeks
- Is that egg fresh? To find out, put it in a pot of cool salt water; if it rises, throw it away
- Freeze leftover wine into ice cubes rather than throwing it out

August

- 1774 Oxygen was discovered by a scientist named Joseph Priestly
- 1819 The first parachute jump in the U.S. took place
- 1858 The city of Boston authorized the installation of the country's first street mailboxes
- 1876 Wild Bill Hitchcock was shot and killed while playing poker. In his hand: a pair of aces and a pair of 8's
- 1906 The Chicago White Sox baseball team had a 19-game winning streak this season
- 1936 Adolph Hitler officially opened the games at the Berlin Olympics
- 1958 The U.S. Postal Service raised the price of a first class stamp from 3¢ to 4¢, making it the first rate hike in 26 years for the P.O.
- 1990 IBM announced that it was getting out of the typewriter manufacturing business
- 1994 The NASDAQ computer network crashed due to a power outage caused by a squirrel

Health Tips: Don't Drown in Liquid Calories

Given the strange variety of weight-loss programs people are trying out these days, the thought of a liquid-only meal plan doesn't seem as crazy as it did once-upon-a-time. But if you're a bit old-fashioned and believe permanent weight loss takes willpower, portion control and exercise to vanquish the fat demons, you're the person who can learn a lot from this article – especially if you only want to shed a few extra pounds that have crept your way of late.

Start by checking out your daily liquid consumption. Do you enjoy what you believe to be an innocent pleasure like a café mocha because you've specified nonfat milk and no topping? You could be in for a surprise. Especially if, later in the day, you add a 12-ounce soft drink, a glass of sweetened ice tea and perhaps a glass of wine or a beer with dinner. Would it surprise you to know that these five treats total well over 600 calories? No joke. For many of us, that's half to one-third of everything we should be eating during the day (and none of it is solid food).

A national beverage guidance panel, convened to figure out how much of an impact liquids have on our national propensity for weight gain, came up with the startling figures listed above. When they multiplied that daily count by days in the month, they came up with an average of 17,528 calories per person. Now that's scary! To help combat these stealth weight-gain triggers, the council made recommendations you can follow to change your drinking habits and, as a byproduct, slim down. Here are three of them:

- 1) **Don't invest your calories in liquids.** They don't register in your stomach like solid food, so they fail to satisfy hunger efficiently. Given the option of orange juice and the whole fruit, choose the latter to stave off hunger and add fiber. In addition to feeling fuller, the whole fruit won't supply fructose, often added to orange juice, which inhibits the body's ability to understand that calories have been taken in. Consequently, you'll feel the urge to consume more.
- 2) **If a product contains high-fructose corn syrup, just say no.** Some experts believe that high-fructose syrup, thrown in so many foods you'd be hard pressed to find ones that don't have it, is the single biggest reason for our national obesity epidemic. Rats, given a steady dose of this additive, regularly experience metabolic problems as a result of being fed soft drinks, fruit juices and sports drinks during research studies. Down the road, fructose-driven weight gain prompts diabetes and heart disease.
- 3) **Get off the soda train.** Researchers following 2300 young girls for ten years proved that soda consumption led to a huge increase in BMI (body mass index). The more soft drinks the girls drank, the more their weight increased. In contrast, a control group of teens who were not allowed to drink soda didn't experience excessive weight gain.

To further drive home the point, check out a study we'd all volunteer to participate in: half the participants of an eating study consumed their carbs as soda while half ingested the same amount of carb calories as jelly beans. At the end of four weeks, the jelly bean eaters gained less weight. The conclusion? All artificial sweeteners are not alike. Whether you're a pink or blue-packet fan (Aspartame®), these sweeteners pose a risk to people who ingest too much; even though they limit beverages to sugar-free types. Less problematic is a sucralose blend (like Splenda®) because the body uses this sugar substitute carb more efficiently than Aspartame and doesn't store it as fat. Habits come and go, but the good news is that if you've acquired one, you can get rid of it! Keep an eye on what you're drinking on a regular basis and you might find that the weight just slips away without having to sacrifice some of your favorite things.

There's Nothing Natural About a Disaster When it Comes to Kids

Over the past few years, weather-related disasters seem to have touched all of us, regardless of where we live. Hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, typhoons and monsoons are but a few of the headline-making tragedies that have impacted our lives.

Given this cluster of natural disasters, psychologists have explored, first hand, the ramifications of such events on the minds of children. Their findings are disturbing. Children who have not been sufficiently prepared to deal with such catastrophes risk permanent emotional damage, so it's incumbent upon parents to communicate with their kids early and often.

Whether you live in Atlanta or Tampa Bay, Chicago or the Carolinas, use your local weather report as a jumping off point for your discussion. Explain the consequences of future weather events and urge your child to be prepared to listen and follow instructions should a crisis erupt. Make and share plans of what the family can and should do in the event of a weather disaster. Make your information-sharing real by staging drill to show them the most protected areas in which to wait out a weather event.

Before a disaster strikes, ask your children to make up a list of their most important things. This helps a child to feel somewhat in control because he or she will know the things they most treasure are accounted for. Keep the list, with plastic bags, in a place the children can access fast. Knowing that they can actually do something about keeping their personal goods safe and sound will go a long way to keeping them confident and upbeat should a disaster strike.

Don't stop with their possessions. Let children help you put together a family emergency kit. As a "graduation gift" when they've internalized all of the tips we've mentioned here, give each child his or her own flashlight and be sure you keep a fresh supply of batteries in the 'fridge.

But remember, kids look to parents for more than just flashlights. They need reassurance, a non-judgmental ear, and, most of all, assurances that you will never leave them alone. In the event of an emergency, experts urge parents to keep their kids with them at all times, for this reinforces your implicit promise not to abandon them under any circumstance.

When a disaster concludes, the biggest gift a parent can give a child is understanding. Allow them to grieve the loss of a toy, a pet or their room. Return to a routine as soon as you can and make structure a big priority. How quickly kids regain their former confidence and sense of security will be a direct result of how quickly you can infuse normalcy back into their lives.

An act as simple as reading a bedtime story may be all it takes to reassure a child that he or she can withstand a horrific event. Most of all, the fact that you haven't left their side could be all it takes to give them a future devoid of fear of impending doom. And that doesn't cost a cent!

Serves 4

Ingredients:

12 oz. sirloin steak (about ¾" thick)
1 loaf French bread (1 lb.; split)
Garlic flavor cooking spray
½ tsp. each: salt and pepper
2 cups ripe tomato chunks
2 bags baby spinach trio or baby spinach (6 oz. each)
½ cup sliced onions
½ cup crumbled bleu cheese
½ cup olive oil and vinegar dressing

- 1) Heat outdoor grill or stovetop
- 2) Coat steak and bread surfaces with garlic spray; sprinkle both with salt and pepper
- 3) Grill steak to taste, turning once, about 6 minutes
- 4) Remove to cutting board, cover with foil and let rest (steak will continue to cook)
- 5) While steak rests, grill bread (sprayed side down) two minutes or until toasted
- 6) Cut bread into chunks; thinly slice steak
- 7) Combine all ingredients in a salad bowl, toss to mix and serve.

The dog days of summer call for creativity and simplicity – and this recipe is the epitome of both. Fire up the grill and you've done the hardest part. For dessert, surprise the family with ingredients for a sundae bar by bringing out the hot fudge and other sauces, whipped topping, sprinkles, crushed cookies and cherries and let them do all the work!

Your Window on the World

What's your window style? Do you prefer to keep window coverings closed? Perhaps you love to let in all the sun you can get. Maybe you find yourself in-between, depending upon the time of day. All of us have privacy issues and insulation concerns, but did you know that the type of window covering you choose could literally be a factor in determining both your mood and energy bill? Given this fact, paying attention to how you dress your windows can literally add to your quality of life.

Decorators know that trends come and go, but personal preference should always be your starting point, so consider these window dressing tips and you'll enjoy your picks for years to come.

Do you desire unobstructed, sunny exposure by day but lots of privacy at night? Your best bet could be cellular shades (also known as honeycombs). These window coverings do a terrific job of filtering in natural light, come in many colors and stack up neatly when hung. Additionally, you can adjust these from the top or the bottom, so you get to control the amount of light and privacy that filters into your rooms.

Are you a privacy fanatic? This may have more to do with your neighbors than paranoia, so when it comes to extreme privacy, you can't go wrong with Roman shades. This window treatment shuts out the world, maximizing darkness. It's an especially appropriate choice if a member of your household works odd hours. Roman shades can also be drawn from the top or bottom.

Do you want some privacy on a budget? Roller shades do it all; drop down to darken, open for a full view of the outside, come in a variety of materials and, thanks to its evolution, the ability of roller shades to snap tight is improved over older, flimsier types is much improved. Opacity and color range cover many bases, so choices are unlimited for those of you decorating on a budget.

Does your taste in window coverings run to unique materials? New styles of solar shades literally block ultraviolet rays and add an element of energy efficiency that will help your budget recover from escalating power rate hikes. If you have a serious window dilemma to fix (you overlook a factory), you might want to try a window film rather than a shade. Metallic coatings offer mirror-like looks for daytime privacy while decorative films can transition your windows into stained glass wannabes. Your fallback could be as exotic as shoji screens or as retro as glass blocks. Guess you could say the sky's the limit, literally and figuratively!

Carpet Talk: Stop Carpet Abuse!

If you can recall the day you wrote the check to cover the cost of carpeting your home, you know the definition of pain. Even if you didn't choose the highest grade of carpet or padding on the market, putting down or replacing a house-full of wall-to-wall can be a daunting and expensive experience, so why would you ever want to take less than excellent care of it?

Regular attention by your carpet care service handles the hygiene, but homeowners must be vigilant when it comes to six distinct signs that trouble could be down the road. Nip them in the bud before they present a threat to your carpet.

The six signs that could indicate the start of trouble are sprouting, shedding, shading, mildew, pilling and dents. If you see any of them, take the appropriate action immediately and your carpet may be around longer than you own the house!

1) **Sprouting:** shoe nails, pet claws or defective cleaning equipment can pull tufts above the level of the carpet. To short-circuit additional problems, use a sharp pair of scissors to trim them as soon as you notice them.

2) **Shedding:** These short, broken fibers can be trapped during the yarn-making process. After your carpet is installed, they may show up as fuzz. While some is normal in high quality spun yarn, it's best to get these fibers up and out by vacuuming to eliminate the problem.

3) **Shading:** Heavy traffic causes carpet pile to lie in a variety of directions, so tufts remaining upright appear darker than compressed fibers. A thorough vacuuming or combing will rectify the situation so pile wears uniformly.

4) **Mildew:** Carpets installed in moist, humid locations are the ones most likely to develop mildew problems. Eliminating the moisture using dehumidifiers and fans are your first line of defense. Ask your carpet care professional about treating interior carpet with a fungicide to clear up the problem for an extended length of time.

5) **Pilling:** The small, fuzzy balls that stick to carpet surfaces are caused when strong, unbroken fibers cling to weak ones. Most often, the cause is using old cleaning equipment, so ask your carpet tech to check out your vacuum and other cleaning tools to make sure worn or broken rollers, beater bars and brushes don't continue to cause pilling. Pets may also be the culprits, by the way.

6) **Furniture dents:** The heavy weight of furniture impacts pile, so moving chairs and couches periodically will help the situation. If the problem comes from years of having furniture in the same place, you can try returning the pile to its former condition by holding a steam iron over (never against) the indented pile, then gently brush the area.

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Inside this issue you'll find:

- Wonders of the Window Box
- Household Tips: Food to the Rescue
- Don't Drown in Liquid Calories
- When Disasters Strike, Kids Need TLC
- Steak and Bread Salad
- Your Window on the World
- Upholstery Talk: Stop Carpet Abuse
- August Money-Saving Special

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