

**NEW ANNUALS FOR**  
**CANADA**

**By: Rob Sproule**

# INTRO

## Foreword:

Creativity is the heart of gardening. When we garden, whether we're designing, planting, or nurturing plants into bloom, we're creating. In the modern world it's rare that we have the ability to create with our own hands; gardening gives us that chance. It's one of the most beloved and widespread passions in the world and, like all passions that survive the passage of time, it is constantly evolving and adapting to changing times in order to stay relevant.

I've lived in the world of gardening my whole life and have watched how rapidly it's changed and how ardently it has remained the same over the last 15 years. I grew up working in my father's greenhouse, which he inherited from his father, and many of the major life lessons that I carry with me I learned from watching and thinking about plants. Through thousands of conversations with gardeners about everything from colour schemes to nibbly rabbits, I've begun to understand that gardeners have a connection with plants that runs much deeper than growing pretty flowers.

Salisbury Greenhouse was founded by Helen and Fred Sproule in 1965 and we've grown to be one of the largest and most trusted Garden Centres in our area. The heart and soul of our business is in growing. In over 4 covered acres we grow millions of plants over the whole year (and if I may say so we've become exceedingly good at it). Recently, my 2 brothers and I, along with my father, became the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of family owners at Salisbury. Adam, the oldest, operates a landscaping division of the company while Dave and I work in the front lines of the evolving gardening industry.

We're young owners, each in our 30s, and we see the world of gardening through enthusiastic eyes. I'm 32 and was married 4 years ago to the love of my life. 3 years ago we moved into a suburban house with a big, mature lot on a street that is full of new families like ours and new yards waiting to be rediscovered and redefined by the next generation of gardeners. My formal schooling is in English literature; I'm wrapping up a Masters of Arts with a thesis of autobiographical poetry about mountaineering in the Canadian Rockies. That I have devoted my career to plants may seem like an odd fit; the academic life is often a long way from gardening. It's actually a perfect fit. Humans have adored plants since before we could write on walls and our history is inseparable from their history. I am also fascinated with plants themselves and find a blooming passion flower or a sprouting bean seed as interesting and complex as any philosophy book. I marvel at their engineering and beauty that always manages to slightly evade articulation. I love watching people react to plants, and when they come through the greenhouse's front door with a face gaunt after a stressful day and find themselves lingering, sometimes for hours, spontaneously exploring the complexities and delicacies of life, it reminds me that our desire to grow and nurture and harvest is not an invented want, but an ancient need.

It's a privilege to share my life with plants and to spend my life watching them grow, and it's a privilege to be able to share some of my enthusiasm with you in this

book. I hope you learn from it but are also inspired by it. I believe that gardening books need to do more than tell you about light levels and growth habits. Gardening books should inspire you to be creative and try new plants and techniques that are and to discover- or re-discover- the unchanging and simple joy of getting your hands dirty and watching the plants you've nourished grow, bloom, and nourish you in return.

Gardening has endured for millennia because it's endlessly versatile. Some aspects of it evolve and adapt and some aspects never change. Where ever there is a seed and some dirt, we can garden. Our need to make things grow and our essential love of flowers never changes, nor does the joy we feel when we first get dirt under our fingernails after a long winter, as if we were rediscovering an old friend. What is constantly evolving in gardening is how we grow and think about the plants themselves and what we can do with them. In this book I will do my best to articulate the change that I've witnessed from my years on the frontlines of the gardening world.

Over thousands of conversations with gardeners I've charted the evolution of how gardeners are thinking about annuals. It used to be that people were the most interested in 'the Basics' and where it came from and how to grow it and take care of it. That's still important, but gardeners – especially younger gardeners – are becoming more interested in what learning about the plant in the broader context of the colour and style of their yard. The majority of annuals we sell now are destined for some kind of container, and in many yards containers provide the bulk of the colour, meaning that new varieties of annuals are increasingly bred specifically to coordinate with others. Annual gardening is becoming more like fashion, about accessorizing the yard and making it, in the words of many a flamboyant fashion designer, "fabulous!"

With every annual in this book I have 3 goals and, if I accomplish these with a few plants while you're reading, I'll consider the book successful. My goals are:

- 1) **to make you fall in love with it**
- 2) **to make you confident that you can take care of it**
- 3) **to inspire you to be creative with it**

Gardening is about creativity, and if I've done my job this book will have given you some of the inspiration and the practical know-how necessary to try something new. Nothing about gardening should be a chore. To me, it's a privilege to be able to get my hands in the soil, even if it's to do a mundane task. I'm passionate about plants because I think that gardening is the most life-affirming thing a person can do, and I hope that this book makes you a little more passionate, too.

### **Changing Trends in Gardening**

Gardening is the most popular and fastest growing hobby in North America and more people than ever before are making growing a valued part of their lives. We're intoxicated by the sight of a crocus pushing itself up through the snow, or of thick

yellow bushels of rudbeckia in September, and it's no surprise to me why. Plants ask for almost nothing and give everything back, pouring oxygen into our yards and spontaneously splashing colours across our yards and lives like a mad painter. After a day amid the sharp angles and halogen lights of offices, people naturally begin to crave the soft fragrances and rich air of their yards for a sense of peace and regeneration. Gardening is the most life-affirming hobby in the world because it's the only hobby that takes care of you as much as you take care of it.

Gardening is much more than a hobby, however, it's a cultural phenomenon. It has a rich history stretching back thousands of years that is as complex as the history of any nation. Anyone who wasn't a nobleman caught growing a chrysanthemum in ancient China was beheaded. In the middle Ages, monks carefully tended their walled gardens as a way of becoming closer to God. In 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century France the very rich showcased their wealth by constructing massive, perfectly ordered gardens, like at the palace of Versailles, symbols of opulence that fuelled the flames of a bloody revolution and ultimately democracy. Columbus sailed not for gold, but for spices and many early explorers risked their lives to wade into unknown jungles in search of new plants for the gardeners back home in England and Spain to experiment with. Most of the annuals we enjoy every year came from these expeditions. How we garden, where we garden, and what we put into our gardens is always changing to reflect our culture, but the thing that has always remained the same is why we garden. Today, home from offices and traffic jams, we garden to take part in the life-affirmation of growing. We garden, like the middle-ages monks and the Empress Josephine gardened, to nourish ourselves.

The last 10 years have seen a huge shift in how we garden in Canada, a shift that's been one of the most dramatic and rapid in history. Before I discuss that shift however, allow me to put it in context with a very brief summary of 20<sup>th</sup> century gardening.

In most parts of Canada gardening didn't become popular until after WWII, when there was a massive housing boom to accommodate returning soldiers and their new families. The single-family home began to appear in great numbers, heralding the first golden age of suburbia and of gardening. In the suburbs, families had a yard of their own and the prosperity of the 50s allowed people more time to spend in their yard. Gardening was suddenly the fastest growing hobby in Canada, and Garden Centers began popping up everywhere to meet the demand, usually being little more than a cold-frame or two that opened for a couple of months in the spring and then closed for the winter.

Until the early 90s, the front yard of an average suburban house often looked very much like the neighbour's front yard. There would be one or two large flower beds in the yard. In the center of each was a shrub, often a potentilla or an evergreen. There might be a few perennials around the shrub, depending on the size of the bed. The perennials tended to be, however, the most expendable part of the front yard garden. The essential part of the garden were the bedding plants that rimmed the edge and were as bright and vibrant as possible. Standard fare was to put red Geraniums at the back, with a crisp line of yellow Marigolds in the center and white Alyssum for a border. Those bold enough to plant in a container often did so with a Dracaena Spike in the center, with red Geraniums and some Petunias or Marigolds around. The only reliable trailing plant available was Lobelia, and it was found in almost every container. In Garden Centers, annuals were sold in "6-packs", which were plastic containers with six cells that held six small plants which were very rarely large enough to bloom. The

customer bought the 6-pack, planted the contents on the May long weekend, and waited. June was the waiting month, time allocated for the plants to grow large enough to bloom. The bedding plants of the day often grew at a frustratingly slow pace, and it often wasn't until the middle to the end of July that they finally erupted into full bloom and the yard was alive and beautiful. August was spent enjoying the colour and trying not to think about the dreaded first frosts, which sometimes came as early as mid September! As short as the bedding plants season was, gardeners persisted, year after year, in putting hours of labour every year into dedicating their yards, if even for a short time, to the celebration of colour. To me, the popularity of gardening in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s, despite the frustratingly short season and the amount of work it required, is testament to the power of colour and of our desire to create something beautiful that we can call our own.

In the early 1990s, a company called Proven Winners introduced a plant called Bacopa. Initially, Bacopa was a stringy, nondescript, and rather pungent little plant that many greenhouse growers dismissed outright. Gardeners, however, had other ideas and bought up Bacopa as soon as it hit the shelves with an enthusiasm that made growers and producers sit up and take notice. The container gardening craze had begun!

Bacopa's popularity was due to the fact that it was a high-performance annual, and instead of being sold in a 6-pack, it was sold in a pot (usually with a 4" diameter) so that gardeners didn't have to spend half the season waiting for it to mature. Not long after Bacopa was introduced, a company called Ball unveiled the Wave petunia. The "Wave" was an even bigger success than Bacopa and quickly became the most popular annual in history! Waves were even faster growing than Bacopa, trailing 3' in a single season, (even a prairie season), a feat unheard of at the time, and whiskey barrels, clay pots, widow boxes, and even wheelbarrows overflowing with Waves quickly became as common a sight as pots full of geraniums. New varieties of high performance annuals were introduced every year, and before long plants like Million Bells, Verbena, and Diascia occupy the same prime benches in garden centers as Marigolds and Geraniums did only a few years before.

At about the same time as the introduction of high-performance annuals, people increasingly began spend more energy and money to gardening in the backyard rather than the front. Throughout the mid and late nineties the front flower beds that once lined suburban streets with geranium red and alyssum white slowly filled with the more economical, less hassle perennials and backyards, hidden from view, filled with life. This shift happened, in my opinion, for 2 reasons. The first is economical. High-performance annuals are much more expensive than the 6-packs, and this made mass plantings in big front yard beds costly operations. The second reason is, in my opinion, much more personal. I believe that the turbulence and uncertainty of world events in the last decade, especially since 2001, have inspired people to think less about maintaining outward appearances and to think more about spending time with their families and the people they love. Gardeners began to make their backyard decks, patios and gazebos more comfortable and inviting by decorating them with carefully planted and well-loved containers. Sales of yard furniture, yard lighting, mosquito repellents, and anything having to do with spending more time outside ("outdoor living" being the buzz-word) have increased dramatically since 2001. Canadians are investing their gardening dollars into spending summer evenings with the people they love in the privacy of their backyard spaces.

Gardening has also become much more popular in the cities, where apartment balconies boast more containers than ever before. This is because container gardening

is all about gardening in small spaces, and the amount of choices suddenly available has made gardening suddenly not only possible but exciting to many apartment and condo dwellers. Garden Centers have also changed considerably. With high-performance annuals came a new emphasis on the person buying the plants. Isles, once notoriously narrow, become wide enough for women to push a baby carriage through or couples to walk through hand in hand. Concrete was poured and tile was laid down so that people didn't have to walk in the mud anymore, and many Garden Centers installed coffee bars and even sandwich bars. Gardening, once considered a rural or suburban pastime, was reaching out to a whole new audience.

As our Garden Centre, we spend a lot of time thinking about how to attract the next generation of gardeners. Though I rarely meet someone who doesn't enjoy gardening, many people my age don't feel that they have the practical know-how to do it well, and without the know-how backing you up it's very hard to be creative (which always involved taking a chance). While the May gardening shopping day is often a significant rite of spring for many Baby Boomers, eagerly planning their garden as they dip into one Garden Centre and out of another, many people in my generation feel overwhelmed walking into a large Garden Centre so they often buy their plants at the box store with the rest of their groceries. One of my most important jobs at Salisbury in the last few years has been to reach out to my peers, to 30-somethings with young families and no green-thumb in sight, and to show them how fun and easy gardening can be. The young families who are moving into their first homes across Canada, whether it's a suburban bungalow or an urban apartment with a balcony, will be the ones who will define how we garden over the next decades. Hopefully some of you are reading this book, possibly because you feel drawn towards gardening but don't know where to start. I hope this helps you become acquainted enough with the basic know-how to be comfortable being creative, and inspired enough thinking about what you can create to want to try something new.