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The Malone Telegram

SEPTEMBER 2026

Fall HOME IMPROVEMENT Guide



Grow the garden of your dreams without spending a ton of green

By Jennifer Barger

Special to the Washington Post

Filling your backyard or front-porch container garden with flowers, veggies and other growing things can feed your body and soul. But green-thumb-ing it will also cost you: The 2026 National Gardening Survey found that, on average, American gardeners spend \$740 a person each year, a jump of more than 18 percent compared with 2025.

Mark Lane, a British gardening expert and BBC commentator, is passionate about making cultivation and landscaping more approachable and affordable. His new book, "The Thrifty Gardener," plots out ways to save money and resources in your yard or on your balcony. Consumers' Checkbook spoke with him by email to dig into his ideas. Here are edited excerpts from that conversation.

What does it mean to be a thrifty gardener?

People assume it means being cheap, but to me it is really about being selective. It's about understanding where



Metro

spending money creates long-term value, and where spending money simply buys convenience or instant gratification. A thrifty garden isn't necessarily a low-cost garden. In fact, some of the most economical gardens over 20 years require significant investment at the start. I would suggest dividing things into three categories: things worth investing in, things worth saving on and things worth making yourself.

Where would you spend on gardening?

Soil improvement: If a garden has poor soil, compacted ground or lacks organic matter, spend money on compost, well-rotted manure, leaf mold, soil conditioners and mulches. Healthy soil affects everything that follows: plant health, drought tolerance, pest resistance and growth rates. Trees: Whether it's a crab apple, maple, birch or ornamental cherry, a tree provides structure, shade, wildlife habitat and seasonal interest for decades. The cost spread over 20 or 30

years becomes negligible. Hard landscaping: Paths, retaining walls, steps, drainage and foundations are expensive to alter later. If a patio settles badly after three winters, you'll wish you'd invested in proper construction from the start. Quality tools: A good spade, secateurs [pruning shears] and pruning saw can last many years. I've seen gardeners repeatedly buy inexpensive tools that break after a season or two. Irrigation and water harvesting: With increasingly unpredictable weather, investing in [rain barrels], storage tanks

or efficient irrigation can save considerable money and effort over time.

Which areas of the garden can I save on?

You could save on annual bedding plants. Grow perennials, self-seeding annuals and flowering shrubs that return reliably instead. Also, pots can be astonishingly expensive. Some beautiful, glazed pots cost more than the plants they contain. I would happily use reclaimed containers, galvanized tubs, vintage finds or

See GARDEN T3

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Garden

From T2

simple terra-cotta rather than chasing designer brands.

You're a big proponent of making things for your garden. What are some of your tricks?

This is where gardening becomes wonderfully thrifty! I make compost with kitchen peelings, lawn clippings, autumn leaves and prunings. It becomes a soil conditioner that would otherwise cost money to purchase.

I also propagate plants. Many perennials can be divided every few years. Softwood cuttings, hardwood cuttings and seed sowing can dramatically expand a planting scheme at minimal cost. A single clump of hardy geranium, for example, might be divided repeatedly throughout its life. You can also use pruned branches and coppiced material to make attractive supports for peas, sweet peas and herbaceous perennials.

I know starting plants from seeds saves money, but isn't it difficult?

Seed sowing has a reputation for being more complicated than it really is. A lot of that comes from the way it's often presented: rows of trays, heated propagators, misting systems, labels everywhere and a sense that if you miss a step, the whole thing collapses. In reality, it can be one of the most economical and flexible ways of gardening.

Feel daunted? Avoid thinking of seed sowing as a single grand project and break it into small, low-risk experiments. A very gentle starting point is direct sowing of reliable species straight into the ground. Hardy annuals like calendula, nigella, cornflower or eschscholzia [poppies] are almost designed for beginners. You prepare a small patch of soil, scatter seed, lightly cover it and let nature do most of the work. No indoor setup, no transplanting, minimal cost and usually quick results.

Another easy entry point is containers. A simple pot on a windowsill or patio can become a micro nursery. Herbs such as basil, parsley or cori-

ander are ideal because they grow quickly, are regularly harvested and don't demand precise conditions. Even if a sowing fails, the financial loss is negligible, and the learning is immediate.

I think many baby gardeners don't understand the difference between perennial and annual plants. How does knowing that help save money?

That distinction is a quiet fundamental that shapes the entire economics of a garden. Once it's properly understood, it changes how people buy, plant and even think about time in the garden.

At its simplest, an annu-

al completes its life cycle in a single growing season. You sow or plant it, it flowers, sets seed and then dies. A perennial, by contrast, returns year after year, often building in size and impact as it matures. That one difference has a surprisingly large effect on long-term spending.

Your book also talks about propagating plants from cuttings. I remember my grandma doing this. Why did it fall out of favor?

Propagation is one of those skills that quietly slipped out of everyday gardening culture. Garden centers have made it incredibly easy to buy ready-grown plants in almost every

season. When a plant is \$6 to \$12 and instantly attractive, it feels simpler to replace than to multiply.

Plus, there's been a loss of intergenerational teaching. Earlier gardening knowledge was often passed through families or local communities - people simply showed each other how to take a cutting from a geranium or divide a clump of iris. As that informal sharing declined, so did confidence. And finally, there's a subtle commercial element. A gardener who propagates well is, frankly, a less frequent customer.

So how do I propagate new plants from old ones?

From a thrifty perspective, propagation is almost unbeatable. It turns one plant into many, reduces risk and allows you to adapt plants to your own conditions over time. It also creates resilience in a garden - if something thrives, you can expand it cheaply; if something struggles, you haven't lost much. It also changes your relationship with plants. Instead of being fixed purchases, they become living resources.

The easiest way to start is with softwood cuttings like pelargoniums (geraniums in everyday language), fuchsias, rosemary (with a bit more

See GARDEN T11

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'Midimalism' is the latest home design trend

Finding the sweet spot between minimalist and maximalist interiors

By **JOLIE KERR**

The Washington Post

Minimalism, you may have heard, is out. Gone are those hallmarks of Millennial style: gray walls, all-white kitchens and stark, unadorned surfaces that were, perhaps, a reaction to growing up in overstuffed homes filled with decorative roosters and voluminous Roman shades. Now, as the interior design pendulum swings back to a more exuberant look — one that might even see the return of those roosters — people are embracing maximalism, a more-is-more approach that mixes colors, patterns, textures and shapes.

As styles go, maximalism is fun, no doubt, but what if it's too much to actually live with?

You may like the look but find yourself distracted and stressed out by visual clutter — not to mention that a home filled to the rafters with decorative items is hard to keep clean and organized.

For those looking to combine the joyfulness of maximalism with the functionality of minimalism, there's a sweet spot:

midimalism.

Charlie Lankston, the executive editor at Realtor.com, calls midimalism "a happy-medium interior design approach that blends the vibrancy of maximalism with the calming aesthetic of minimalism." A midimalist home is calm but not stark, with plenty of personal touches — but not so many that the space becomes chaotic.

"Midimalism is the middle ground between minimalism and maximalism, and captures the uncluttered foundation of a minimalist approach with strong visual elements that map to maximalism," says Kendra Sinclair, a home design trends expert at Thumbtack.

If a midimalist look is one you'd like in your home, these expert tips can help you achieve it.

STRIKE A BALANCE

"Minimalist decor is a simple, no-frills style featuring subtle texture and clean lines," Lankston says, in contrast to maximalist homes, which she describes as "eclectic and often over-the-top, integrating clashing patterns, bold textures and often rich colors." Midimalism strikes a balance by combining elements of the two interior design styles to create a calm space

that has warmth and personality.

AIM FOR CLEAN BUT NOT COLD

Midimalism borrows from both the clean minimalist aes-

thetic and the boldness of maximalism. "It builds on top of an organized base with selective layers that blend colors, patterns and meaningful objects," Sinclair says.

"It is that middle space where the room feels clean, but not cold. Personal, but not cluttered," says Neha Khanna, the

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Trend

From T4

CEO and co-founder of Fabrica Kraft.

"In practical terms, it could be a simple sofa with beautifully made cushions, a curtain fabric with a good fall, one strong piece of art or a few personal objects that actually mean something."

ADD POPS OF COLOR TO A NEUTRAL PALETTE

Using muted or neutral colors as a design foundation reduces visual noise. "Midimalist homes feature a mix of clean lines and softer forms, and tend to adhere to a more neutral color palette punctuated by a few deeper-colored accents," Lankston says. "Find unique patterns that share a neutral shade, ornate pieces placed against a more muted background, or an incredible arrangement of various artworks on a single wall, next to less distracting furniture and flooring."

LEAVE SOME BREATHING ROOM

"It is not about filling every corner, and it is not about stripping everything away either," Khanna says. "The room has breathing space, but it does not feel unfinished." When it comes to selecting items to display, avoid filler decor and trendy items.

"The goal," Sinclair says, "is to look practical, planned and thoughtfully curated."

COMBINE COORDINATING AND

CONTRASTING TEXTURES

One way to achieve a midimalist look is to layer textures, Sinclair says, which "helps to create warmth and depth without overwhelming a space with unique objects and a smorgasbord of color. This could look like a stone surface paired with velvet seat coverings and embroidered pillows, wood paneling on walls or ceiling or a pop of color on trim."

TRY BOLD, SCULPTURAL ELEMENTS

"Midimalism design features unique, interesting items that tend to be sculptural and bold, and have enough visual weight not to need supporting pieces for the space to feel complete," says interior designer Daniela Alilovic. "This can include bold art pieces, an accent area rug or impactful coffee table decor."

AVOID CLUTTER AND OVERDECORATING

Midimalism requires a controlled approach to decorating. "It allows warmth without clutter," Khanna says. "It allows pattern, but not too many competing patterns. It allows personal pieces, but only the ones that add something to the room. ... It is all about choosing what gives the room character and removing what distracts from it."

Because midimalism relies on restraint, Alilovic stresses eliminating clutter and unnecessary items. "Clutter and too many decorative items create too much visual weight, which goes against the midimalism look and feel," she says.

USE THE RULE OF THREE

To avoid overfilling a space, Alilovic recommends limiting groupings of items to three or

choosing a single bold decorative piece that can stand on its own. "Every piece should be thought about before in-

corporating it into the design," she says, "to ensure it aligns with adding impact to the

See TREND T11



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4 things to know about kitchen renovations

Metro

Kitchens are often described as the most popular room in a home, and that's not mere conjecture.

A 2022 survey from House Digest asked participants to identify the room they consider most important in their homes, and roughly 41 percent chose the kitchen.

Residents tend to congregate in kitchens in the morning and then again in the evening when meals are prepared and, in homes without formal dining rooms, eaten. With so much time spent in the kitchen, it's no wonder that the 2022 U.S. Houzz & Home Study: Renovation Trends found kitchens to be the most popular interior room to upgrade.

With so many people interested in kitchen renovations, the following are four things homeowners should know about these popular improvement projects.

1. Expect to spend some money. Most home improvement projects require a significant financial investment, but kitchen renovations are among the more expensive undertakings. The overall cost of a project will depend on a host of variables unique to each home, including homeowners' preferences, but HomeAdvisor estimated the average kitchen remodel in 2023 cost between \$14,611 and \$41,432. Homeowners considering an upscale kitchen remodel may receive six figure estimates for such projects.

2. Expect a good return on investment. If sticker shock settles in when receiving an initial kitchen remodel estimate, perhaps it can help homeowners to know that such a project may provide a strong return on investment (ROI). According to Remodel-

ing magazine's '2024 Cost vs. Value Report,' a minor kitchen remodel provides a 96 percent ROI. A major kitchen remodel mid-range (49 percent) and a major kitchen remodel upscale (38 percent) did not provide as notable a ROI.

3. Expect the project to take some time. Kitchens are large rooms with a lot of components, so renovating these spaces can take some time. Estimates vary depending on the size of the room, the scale of the remodel and the materials chosen, but Angi reports a kitchen remodel for most homes takes six weeks to four months. That's a sizable window, and it reflects the likelihood that unforeseen issues like supply chain interruptions or the discovery of mold will arise at some point during the renovation. Though it's impossible to determine precisely how long a project will take before it begins, homeowners renovating their kitchens may want to plan for the project to take two months if not longer.

4. Expect to use your kitchen during the renovation. If the timeline of a renovation is scary, homeowners should know they will likely be able to use their kitchen even after the project begins. Though the room might not remain a popular gathering space once the work starts, Angi notes kitchens are typically out of commission for around six weeks during a renovation. That still requires some pre-planning in relation to meals, but it also suggests homeowners won't be without a kitchen for months on end.

Kitchen renovations are popular projects. Homeowners who know what to expect before such projects commence can make it through a renovation more smoothly.



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A guide to fall lawn care for cool-season grasses

Metro

Spring is the season most often associated with lawn care, and for good reason. Grass starts growing in spring, and the season is a great time to fertilize many grasses in the hopes lawns can look their best and endure the hotter, dryer weather of summer.

Spring might mark the time when many homeowners begin tending to their lawns each year, but it's important to recognize the significance of fall lawn care as well. Grasses vary, and homeowners are urged to identify which type of grass is in their lawn so they can ensure it gets the care it needs before winter's first frost. Cool-season grasses like perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass are common in various regions, and the following strategies can help homeowners with these types of grasses tend to their lawns this fall.

¥ Stick to your recommended fertilization schedule. Homeowners who have been fertilizing since spring are urged to continue doing so in fall at the recommended interval. It's easy to forget to fertilize in fall thanks to cooler temperatures that don't call lawn care to mind and busier schedules after school starts again and summer vacation season ends. But many fertilizer manufacturers advise users of their products to fertilize several

times over the course of the year, including in fall. Stick to the intervals recommended on the packaging of the fertilizer you've been using, making sure not to forget to fertilize this fall.

¥ Conduct a soil test. A soil test can determine if the soil is lacking any nutritive elements it needs to come back strong in spring. Certain amendments can restore pH balance if necessary and foster stronger growth when lawns come back in spring.

¥ Aerate, if necessary. Soil can become compacted over time, and that can cause a range of problems for a lawn. Compacted soil can make it harder for water to reach the roots of grass, which weakens grass and makes it more vulnerable to damage during adverse weather events like drought. Compacted soil also makes it harder for nutrients in fertilizer to get into the soil. Aerating is best left to professionals, particularly in larger lawns, as the job can foster strong root development when done properly.

¥ Remove thatch where it's excessive. Thin layers of thatch can benefit lawns by delivering nutrients from grass clippings and leaves to a lawn. However, when thatch is excessive, it can block air, water and even

See FALL T10



Feeling those fall vibes yet?

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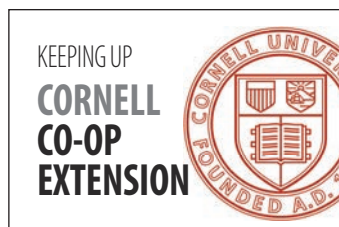
North Country Clean Energy Hub is transforming NNY homes

By **KATELYN LAROSE**

Cornell Cooperative Extension, clean energy program manager

Since 2022, the North Country Clean Energy Hub has been diligently working to make homes in the north country more comfortable, safe and energy efficient for the residents who call it home. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County works in collaboration with the Adirondack North Country Association, and Cornell Cooperative Extension of St. Lawrence County to operate the North Country Clean Energy Hub.

Created to bring clean energy resources closer to the communities that need them, the North Country Clean Energy Hub assists residents, small businesses, and non-profits in navigating the many clean energy and energy efficient opportunities available in various ways. Over the last four years, the Hub has participated in and hosted over 400 community events including attending county fairs, tabling at communi-



ty-wide events and hosting energy workshops at local libraries. Through these outreach efforts, members of the Hub team have connected with over 23,500 north country residents and further assisted 950 residents, small businesses and non-profits by connecting them with available resources, program information and application assistance. These outreach efforts have provided opportunities for residents to ask questions, learn more about available resources and chat directly with an Energy Advisor about their unique needs.

Through the process of engaging with north country residents, the Hub staff have identified many critical needs of homes and buildings that, without being addressed, prevent res-

idents from accessing the incentives offered by NY-SERDA. The Critical Home Repair Pilot Project was developed to complete these necessary repairs on homes deferred from the NY-SERDA programs. Through this pilot project 14 homes received additional support which led to over \$210,000 in energy upgrades for these homes alone.

While the Hub has celebrated numerous accomplishments since its launch in 2022, the work is far from finished. The team continues to strengthen its knowledge and expertise by participating in trainings and

other professional development opportunities while staying up to date on changing programs, technologies, and opportunities. It will continue to serve as a local resource, helping residents better understand their options, and connect them with programs and services that can help turn energy goals into reality. Lastly, the Hub will continue working to ensure the unique needs, challenges and priorities of north country communities are brought to the attention of NYS agencies.

Four years in and the North Country Clean Energy Hub has demonstrated

the value and importance of bringing resources, organizations and communities together. Through continued outreach, education and one-on-one assistance, the Hub will continue helping north country residents take steps towards more comfortable, safer and energy-efficient homes and businesses while contributing to a stronger clean energy future for the region.

To learn more about the North Country Clean Energy Hub and how to connect with your local energy adviser for additional resources, visit northcountry-cleanenergyhub.org.

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How homeowners can turn attics into livable space

Metro

Houses typically feature various areas that are traditionally designed for storage, such as garages, basements and attics. However, with some renovation, these spaces can be transformed into livable areas.

Homeowners who would like to convert attics into livable spaces need to take certain things into consideration before starting an improvement project. While the attic may seem like it has plenty of room and is structurally sound enough to walk in, that's not necessarily so. To be converted into usable living space, an attic must be brought up to the standards of modern building codes, according to the design experts at Board & Vellum. Retrofitting beams and insulation can eat up available space in an attic. Thus, it is best to consult an expert to see if an attic can be converted. Furthermore, an attic that was not initially designed as a room when the house was built can add extra 'load' upstairs if it is

converted. That could present certain structural problems.

That means a structural engineer also must be consulted to see if adding beams, flooring and drywall will necessitate other changes elsewhere in the home to accommodate the extra load. In order to have a functional attic room, building codes will dictate that it needs to be accessible by a full-size staircase. Also, it will need to have another exit in case of an emergency so that will likely be an accessible window, according to the home information site The Fill.

Homeowners' budgets and renovation plans will need to factor into these considerations. Homeowners also are advised to check local permits to determine what else may be required to go forward. It is best to follow the rules. Lack of a permit for work can affect the ability to sell a home down the line.

Individuals also should plan for heating and cooling upgrades as the home will need to have ductwork installed

in the attic, or at the least, a stand-alone heating and cooling unit. As heat rises, it can get quite warm in an attic, so ventilation and comfort should be considered. The attic will need to be wired for electricity for lighting and other needs. Air

sealing and additional insulation can the attic space more comfortable as well. Consult with a qualified electrician and an HVAC technician and have an energy audit done to discuss needs.

Attic renovations can give

homeowners more space in their homes, which can be used as offices, bedrooms or cozy corners. This is no small undertaking and all of the right steps need to be followed to ensure a legal, safe and successful renovation.



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Tips to maximize your closet space

Metro

Who couldn't use a little more closet space at home? As individuals accumulate more belongings, they need places to store all of these items.

While modern homes may be built with extra storage in mind, older homes often place a premium on closet space. Homes built earlier than the 1980s may have small closets in bedrooms and only one or two additional closets around the home for linens and other items.

The most obvious solution to a lack of closet space is to build more closets. But too often home floor plans cannot accommodate new closets. Therefore, homeowners may have to get creative to maximize their space.

SORT AND DISCARD

Individuals can take some time to empty closets and assess what is in them. Sometimes more space can come from simply thinning out belongings that are no longer used. Take off the plastic coverings on dry cleaning and discard bulky shoe boxes.

INVEST IN THINNER HANGERS

Clothes hangers come in all types, but the thinnest

and most durable ones tend to be the no-slip velvet variety. Such hangers keep garments from slipping off and feature an ultra-thin design, says Real Simple magazine.

USE STORAGE CONTAINERS

Grouping items together and condensing them can free up space. Tuck belts, handbags and other items into storage bins that can be labeled and stacked. Loose items can look more cluttered and even take up more space when spread out.

PAIR SHELVES WITH RODS

For those with enough space, hanging a few shelves in unused areas in the closet can provide more storage space. If there is sufficient space above the rod, install a shelf and place seldom-used items up high.

GET A CLOSET SYSTEM

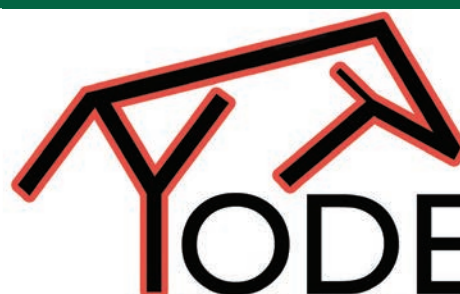
A customized closet system will certainly provide the best chances to maximize closet space. These companies will measure the closet and assess the contents to draw up a design that will give homeowners what they need. Closet systems also can adjust and grow with lifestyle changes.

CHOOSE OTHER STORAGE SOLUTIONS

In addition to closets, people can identify other spaces to store items. This can include bins under beds, storage benches or ottomans, the back sides of doors, or in furniture with built-in drawers. Individuals also can purchase free-standing closets or armoires that can fill in when rooms do not have enough closet space or no closet at all. Maximizing closet space comes down to some creativity, de-cluttering and utilizing additional furniture to meet needs.



Metro



PLANNING FALL PROJECTS?

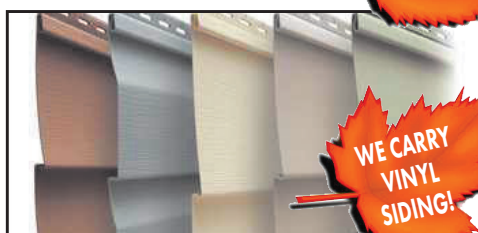
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Fall

From T7

fertilizer from reaching the soil. Thatch often can be removed with a rake, but lawns with especially thick layers of thatch may need to be scarified. Homeowners can take a DIY approach to scarifying or hire a landscaping professional to dethatch the lawn and remove the thatch from their properties.

¥ Continue to water the lawn. A cool-season grass will continue to require water in-

to the fall. Though the lawn won't need to be watered as frequently in fall as in summer, various lawn care professionals note cool-season grasses still need roughly an inch of water each week in fall.

¥ Remove leaves as they fall. Fallen leaves can affect a lawn in much the same way as excessive amounts of thatch, blocking water and nutrients from reaching the soil. So it's best to remove fallen leaves, especially when they begin to fall in large quantities.

Fall is an opportune time to tend to a lawn to increase the chances grass grows back strong in spring.

Trend

From T5

space, without too much visual weight.”

THINK MIX-AND-MATCH, NOT MATCHY-MATCHY

Matching furniture or prefabricated decorative sets can leave a room feeling stark and void of personality. “Do not purchase every piece from the same store — avoid matchy-matchy. You don’t want your space to look like a showroom,” says Samantha-Jane Agbontaen, an interior



Aim for clean but not cold in your interior spaces, blending color and pattern. msn.com

designer and founder of House Designer.

“If everything is beige, flat and empty, it becomes minimalism without warmth,” Khanna says. “Midimalism needs some life in it.”

LAYER ON THE PERSONALITY

Start with a neutral base to create a calm foundation, and add personality through the use of layers, Khanna says. “Soft furnishings are one of the easiest

ways to do this. You can keep the larger furniture simple and bring in warmth through cushions, curtains, bolsters, table linens, throws or a single upholstered piece. The idea is to let the room feel lived-in without being overloaded.”

EDIT, EDIT, EDIT

“Midimalism needs editing,”

Khanna says. “Too many small objects, too many unrelated colors or too many prints can quickly push the room into visual clutter.”

Lankston echoes that: “Achieving the midimalism look is less about creating a whole new aesthetic and more about editing what you already have.”

Garden

From T3

patience), lavender (slightly trickier but rewarding) or hydrangeas.

The simple method:

Take a nonflowering shoot about 8 to 10 centimeters long. Cut just below a leaf node with clean scissors or secateurs. Remove the lower leaves, leaving a small tuft at the top. Insert into a pot of free-draining compost (multipurpose mixed with a little grit or perlite if available). Water lightly and place somewhere bright but not in harsh sun.

Arguably even simpler than cuttings is division, especially for perennials. Plants like hostas, daylilies, astringia and hardy geraniums. These can often be lifted and split with a spade or two forks. Each section becomes a new plant. The advantage here is immediacy: You’re not waiting for rooting, you’re simply redistributing established growth.

What’s the biggest thing you hope people take away from the book?

The most economical thing in gardening is patience. Many gardening expenses arise because we want a finished garden immediately. We buy large plants instead of young ones. We replace plants before understanding why they failed. We redesign areas before they’ve had time to mature.

A thrifty gardener tends to think in years rather than

weeks. If I had \$1,300 to spend on a garden, I would probably allocate a large proportion to soil preparation, a few excellent structural plants, perhaps one or two trees and good infrastructure. Then I’d fill the gaps through propagation, division, seed sowing and time. That’s where the real thrift lies: spending generously on the bones of the garden and economically on everything that can grow, multiply or improve naturally over time.

Jennifer Barger is con-

tent director at Washington Consumers’ Checkbook and Checkbook.org, a nonprofit organization with a mission to help consumers get the best service and lowest prices. It is supported by consumers and takes no money from the service providers it evaluates. You can access Checkbook’s ratings of local garden centers and related advice free until Sept. 15 at Checkbook.org/WashingtonPost/garden-centers.

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