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Lily-of-the-Valley

Heather Clemenson

Lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*) is an herbaceous perennial that blooms in spring. It is considered a useful groundcover and is sold in many garden centres. Its tiny white, bell-shaped flowers have a wonderful scent that has been used for generations to make perfumes, soaps, cosmetics, candles and other household fragrances. It has also made its way into innumerable bridal bouquets. I have lily-of-the-valley in my garden and pick small fragrant bunches to bring into the house every spring.

Lily-of-the-valley is considered an invasive plant in Ontario and is almost impossible to remove once established. Last year, my lily-of-the-valley was spreading beyond the borders of a flowerbed so I energetically dug out sections. A day or so later, I found a rash on my wrists. I wear gardening gloves but many are too short to completely cover the wrists. Over the years I have been susceptible to various forms of contact dermatitis from plants and take extra precautions for those I know. Lily-of-the-valley was not on my list!

I researched lily-of-the-valley to see if it could cause dermatitis and the answer was 'yes'. I discovered that this plant is hazardous to human health. Lily-of-the-valley is poisonous if ingested, as are many other garden plants. All its parts are toxic and can cause serious issues, particularly if eaten by young

Contents

- ◆ Lily-of-the-Valley [1](#)
- ◆ Ask a Master Gardener [2](#)
- ◆ The Dirt on Container Vegetable Growing [3](#)
- ◆ Spring is Coming, and so is Asparagus [5](#)
- ◆ Hepaticas - The Earliest of All [6](#)
- ◆ Wood Poppy - *Stylophorum diphyllum* [8](#)
- ◆ Yellow Archangel – Angel or Devil? [10](#)
- ◆ Find us [11](#)



Lily of the valley
Heather Clemenson

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children and pets when it can be fatal. On the toxicity scale of one to ten, where a rating of one is the worst, the plant rating is one if eaten and three for dermatitis.

Lily-of-the-valley may look attractive and smell delightful, but it certainly has its drawbacks - not only poisonous, but invasive and hard to remove. Perhaps it might be worth re-considering growing lily-of-the-valley in your garden. 🌱

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan and Ann McQuillan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions

I would like to plant a vine along the fence on the west side of my backyard. The space doesn't receive a lot of sun, due to large trees on my neighbour's property. Can you suggest some vines that might do well in these conditions?

There are some things to consider before deciding on a vine, such as what kind of fence it is, and who it belongs to (and you might want to make sure the neighbour agrees to having a vine, as it likely won't stay on your side of the fence only). Vines that climb by twining need something narrow to wrap around, so will climb chain link but will need a trellis on most wood or plastic fences. Wood fences will deteriorate faster if they have plants growing right up against them, so you might want to install a support in front of the fence for the vines rather than having them on the fence itself. As well, be prepared for the fact that vines in general are vigorous plants and will need regular monitoring and pruning to keep them under control.

Here are some vines you might consider, that will grow in part shade:

Climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*) is zone 4. A sturdy vine with large flat clusters of white flowers, and reddish exfoliating bark, and is slow-growing until it is well established.

Japanese hydrangea (*Schizophragma hydrangeoides*) is zone 5, with a similar look to climbing hydrangea, has white or pink flowers, and is slow growing. May be only marginally hardy in Ottawa, though.

Dropmore Scarlet Honeysuckle (*Lonicera x brownii* 'Dropmore Scarlet'), zone 3. It has red and orange tubular flowers. It may need more sun than your space offers, though.

Frost grape (*Vitis riparia*), zone 2. Woody vines that produce fruit which is edible but sour. Frost grape is an Ontario native and has sweet-scented flowers.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), zone 3. This is a fast grower that will need frequent pruning to control, but it is an Ontario native, turns a lovely red in fall, and provides berries and shelter for birds.

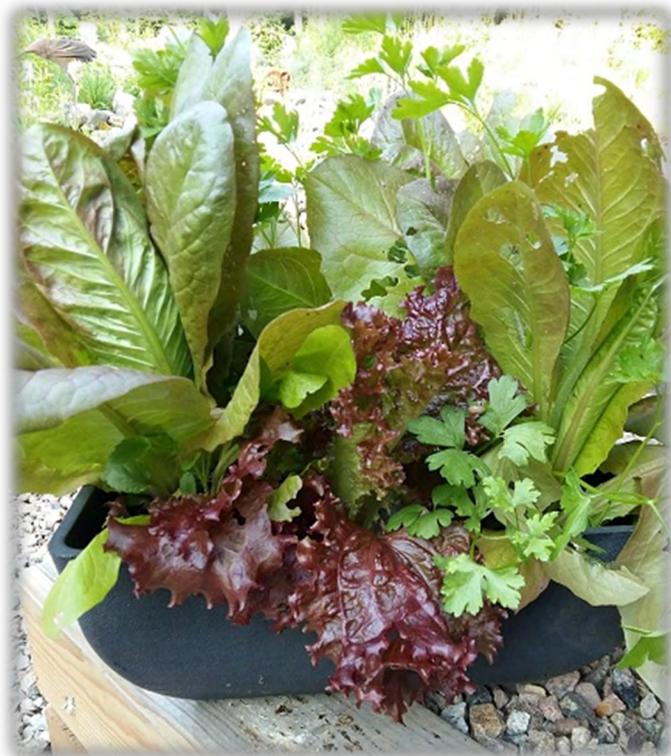
Variegated porcelain vine (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata* 'Elegans'), zone 5. It has green and white leaves and turquoise berries (although berries may not be produced in shadier conditions). Can be cut back to 30 cm every 3 years to keep it dense. Can be invasive, so perhaps not as good a choice as previous options. 🌱



Blue hepatica (see page 6)
Agnieszka Keough

The Dirt on Container Vegetable Growing

Barbara Long



Lettuce in small pot

Catherine Disley

After three decades of gardening, I left my in-the-dirt garden behind and began life in high-rise buildings. Since then, I have been adapting my green thumb to container gardening.

This article focuses on practical ideas for vegetable gardeners who have no access to a plot of land or an outside water source.

What to Grow

Begin by looking in your fridge or reviewing this week's grocery list to help you make a list of vegetables to grow. Start with a few favourites, and when you have some success, expand your horizons.

You can purchase small pots of vegetable seedlings or packets of seeds. Lettuce, beans and peas, for instance, grow readily from seed. I enjoy

salads so my favourites include: cherry tomatoes, spinach, leaf lettuce varieties, green onions, cucumbers, red peppers and snap peas.

Containers

As a general rule, larger containers of all types retain moisture longer than smaller ones. Consider shopping at agriculture and pond supply stores for economical choices.

Wood is a renewable resource for a sturdy planter. Cedar and pine boards are options but avoid using pressure treated lumber which may leach chemicals into the soil. I built a raised garden bed with 2 inch x 6 inch cedar boards and planter blocks. No tools were needed. I lined it with garden cloth before adding soil. You can raise the height by adding more boards and footings.



Deck block

Barbara Long

Cloth planter bags are lightweight, inexpensive and readily available either for setting on the ground or hanging from a hook.

Self-Wicking Containers

These are DIY planters with a water reservoir in the bottom. They use the upward capillary movement of water through the soil to reach plant roots. GOOGLE self-wicking containers for lots of details and videos. The benefit is that water and fertilizer don't drain out the bottom so you don't water as often and you save money on fertilizer.

Sun and Wind

In general, vegetables need lots of sun (minimum of 6 hours per day); southern and western exposures are sunnier than northern and eastern exposures.

Assess your outdoor space to determine how much sun it receives. Try drawing a grid of the space and record where and how long the sunlight falls. Another option: buy or borrow a sun tester.

In a high-rise building, wind will be a factor because it dries out soil quickly. Try filling your pots 5 cm below the top and use mulch to retain moisture.

Using row cover cloth on your plants reduces moisture loss while allowing up to 95% of the sunlight and rain to penetrate. It also keeps out pests. Using a row cover means you can extend your growing season by warming up the soil in the spring and keeping it warm into fall.

Water Source

One time-consuming chore is watering your container garden. An apartment balcony usually doesn't have an outdoor water faucet so you will be hauling water from inside. However, you can adapt your kitchen or bathroom faucet by attaching a standard garden hose to it. Remove the aerator and take it to the hardware store so you get the right-sized adaptor.

Gardening requires lots of water – most of it in the form of perspiration—Lou Erickson , ice hockey player



Author's tap with adapter

Barbara Long

Growing Medium and Nutrients

If you are just getting started, purchase soil specifically made for container vegetable gardening. It has the right fertilizers and drainage texture. Your vegetables will use up these nutrients over the growing season so add compost or fertilizer to replenish them. You can use a balanced fertilizer (20-20-20) at the beginning of the season. Once flowering starts, switch to a high potassium fertilizer (9-15-30), especially for tomatoes. A liquid fertilizer is convenient for urban gardens because it can be added when watering and requires less storage.

Think Vertical

Vegetables with a twining habit (pole beans) or tendrils (cucumbers) will attach themselves to structures like poles or trellises and grow upwards to maximize the space you have available. Vining plants (tomatoes and sweet potatoes) will continue to grow in height if supported by stakes or cages. 🌱

Spring is Coming, and so is Asparagus

Sheila Currie



Asparagus plant in fern form

Rasbek, File:[Asperge planten Asparagus officinalis.jpg](#)" by Rasbak is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

The long winters in our region can make gardeners look forward to spring and the re-emergence of perennials, including edibles. One of the more common perennial vegetables, asparagus shoots make their appearance not long after winter's snowy blanket is gone and April sunshine warms the ground.

While the exact origins of asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) are not known, there are reports of it growing in the wild in sandy seaside locations on the Mediterranean, and in Eurasia and Europe around 2000 years ago. Julius Caesar was reputed to have been a fan, as was King Louis XIV for whom asparagus was reportedly grown at Versailles.

Cultivating asparagus in Ontario's colder climate is more challenging than in milder climates where it is native. While some long-standing heritage varieties such as 'Mary Washington' are still found in Ontario, growers and consumers alike have benefitted enormously from the introduction of hybrids developed by the University of Guelph Asparagus Breeding Program over the past twenty years. Before then, Canada imported a great deal of asparagus, but today Ontario and other parts of the country have a healthy and growing commercial asparagus production. The 'Guelph Millennium' variety has become one of the top asparagus varieties grown in North America, and the research program continues to develop robust new strains.

Growing asparagus requires time and patience: it takes a few years to establish a patch that produces a mature yield. Although it can be grown from seed, planting year-old asparagus crowns will shorten the time to harvest. Older, larger crowns can also be transplanted but tend to suffer more transplant shock than first year stock. In any case, harvesting should await the second year after planting, and even then be done sparingly while plants are still becoming established.

Spears grow quickly – up to several centimetres per day in ideal growing conditions – and can be picked when at least pencil-thick and minimum 20 cm (8") long. Mature plants can produce steadily for a couple of months until summer temperatures arrive; at this point spears will become spindly and it is time to let the plants grow into their fern form. Allowing ferns to grow abundantly for the rest of the season is critical for feeding next year's crop. Ferns can be cut down in late fall, or left until spring; applying a few inches of mulch on the crowns will help keep them insulated over the winter.

Asparagus grows best in full sun in well drained, neutral-to-alkaline soils with pH in the 6.5-7.5

range. To plant asparagus, dig a trench 20-25 cm (8-10") deep and 45-50 cm (18-20") wide, and spread out the roots of individual crowns, spacing them about 30 cm (12") apart. Cover the crowns with several cm of soil and wait until the tips poke through before covering with another several cm of soil. Asparagus are heavy feeders, so when planting the crowns, work organic matter into the soil and top dress at the beginning and mid-way through the season. And now, we just have to wait for spring 🌱



White and green asparagus
[Pinprick, asparagus](#) by pinprick is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

Did you know?

White asparagus is not a special variety of asparagus, but is simply grown without sunlight so spears do not produce chlorophyll. This is typically done by mounding soil up over the crowns and then rows, as they grow.

In Germany, white asparagus, or *Spargel* is so popular that its April to June growing season is known as *Spargelzeit* during which time people flock to festivals celebrating this special vegetable.

In contrast, purple asparagus is a variety, for example *Purple Passion* or *Pacific Purple*, which are grown from mutant strains.

***Good asparagus needs minimal treatment and is best eaten with few other ingredients.*—Yotam Ottolenghi—Chef**

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[Vegetable Growing Calendar](#)

**Native Plant:
 Hepaticas - The Earliest of All**

Agnieszka Keough



Hepatica
Agnieszka Keough

Venture out into the local woods after the snow has melted and the sun has dried the ground and you won't find much colour except for the browns of last year's leaves. But within a few weeks of warm weather, long before trilliums cover the forest floor, a most wonderful spring ephemeral – hepatica, also known as liverleaf – emerges.

So, what is this perennial, with a name that brings to mind a bile-producing organ? Both genus (*Hepatica*) and common name (liverleaf) refer to the plant's trilobed, often reddish leaf and its resemblance to a human liver. This is the reason that early herbalists thought it provided treatment for liver disease, a claim long since discarded.

Hepaticas are small woodland perennials with jewel-like flowers in shades of blue, mauve, pink and sometimes white, contrasting perfectly against the drabby leaf litter. As long as you pay attention to what's underfoot, you won't miss them on your early spring hike.



Hepatica, showing leaf
Agnieszka Keough

Although dainty buttercup-like flowers give the plant an ephemeral quality, hepatica is tougher than you'd expect. You can't be a proverbial "wallflower" when you schedule your blooms for the unpredictable weather of April and May! Looking closely at this diminutive perennial, you'll be amazed by its intriguing adaptations.

Growing in the deciduous and mixed forests of eastern North America, hepaticas prefer humus-rich, well-drained soil and filtered sun, but they can happily grow on rocky ground and can tolerate drought, thanks to their leathery leaves. The foliage is evergreen, allowing the plant to use every chance it gets to photosynthesize, even on warmer, sunny, winter days.

Plants starting their growth so early in the season are vulnerable to temperature swings. Hepatica's developing flower bud is well protected, enclosed within bracts covered, like its stem, with a fuzzy coat of hair.

You might notice that we are not the only ones attracted to those cheerful flowers: native bees, flies and beetles forage on hepatica's pollen when not much else is available. Although the plant takes advantage of insects to pollinate and increase diversity, it can also self-pollinate - an insurance policy for times when bad spring weather prevents pollinators from doing their job.

To help seed dispersal and increase germination success, liverleaf uses the same trick as about thirty percent of other herbaceous woodland plants (trilliums and bloodroots among them), called myrmecochory. By producing seeds containing a tasty packet, rich in fats and other nutrients, laced with an attracting pheromone, they entice ants to take these delicious treats to their nests. The treat gets eaten and the viable seed is dumped outside of the nest on the ant's equivalent of our compost heap. A great spot for germination!

Identifying hepatica when encountered in the forest is easy, if any foliage is present. The only two native North American hepaticas differ in the shape of the leaf lobes. If they are pointy, you are dealing with the sharp-lobed variety (known by botanical name *Hepatica nobilis* var. *acuta*, syn. *Anemone acutiloba*) and if round, it's a round-lobed liverleaf (*Hepatica americana*, *H. nobilis* var. *obtus* syn. *Anemone americana*).

No matter which variety you see, surely its beauty will charm you. If you're an avid gardener who cares about growing native plants, you might like to find a place for hepatica under a deciduous tree in your garden. Success requires mimicking nature and providing forest-like conditions, with a generous amount of leaf litter as mulch. Both hepaticas and the tree will thank you for that. 🌿

Native plant:

Wood Poppy - *Stylophorum diphyllum*

Gillian Boyd



Wood poppy, *Stylophorum diphyllum*

Gillian Boyd

Stylophorum diphyllum, commonly called the wood or celandine Poppy, is a native plant found in the northern and eastern United States and southwestern Ontario, its northernmost global range. Like many spring ephemerals, it prefers rich mixed woodland conditions but is now endangered and has been dying out in the wild. Habitat loss is the main cause as well as the invasion of garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) and Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*).

Besides general degradation from development and logging, recreational human access has been very detrimental to wood poppy habitat. Activities such as lighting fires, trampling, vandalism and littering have all caused permanent damage to the local flora and fauna. Use of mountain bikes and all-terrain vehicles has been especially destructive. The three remaining populations are now protected under the Federal Species at Risk Act and Ontario's Endangered Species Act.

The Federal and Ontario governments are working together under the National Recovery Strategy to protect, restore and increase existing wood poppy populations, though trespassing remains a perpetual

problem. In conjunction with landowners, their efforts include improving degraded habitat, monitoring, protection incentives and studying plants and seed dispersal, together with assessing genetic variability.

The wood poppy prefers early sun before trees leaf out and shade or semi-shade to thrive thereafter. It will tolerate more sun in garden conditions but goes dormant if the soil is too dry. In spite of this, the wood poppy seems happy in my fast-draining sandy soil. It flowers in May and intermittently through the summer if there is sufficient moisture. I don't water it specially but it has never yet gone dormant in my garden.

The wood poppy is pubescent or downy and contains an orange rubbery sap. The large, bright yellow four-petaled single flowers appear above long-stemmed pairs of leaves at the top of 30 cm flowering stems. They have a thick cluster of anthers surrounding a prominent stigma, and produce pollen but no nectar. They self-seed easily from soft-bristled seedpods that droop downwards once the flowers are finished. Wood poppies also produce elaiosomes, oil-rich structures attached to their seeds that are attractive to ants that carry them away to feed their larvae and thus help with seed dispersal.



Wood poppy seed heads

James Hade, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pods2.jpg>
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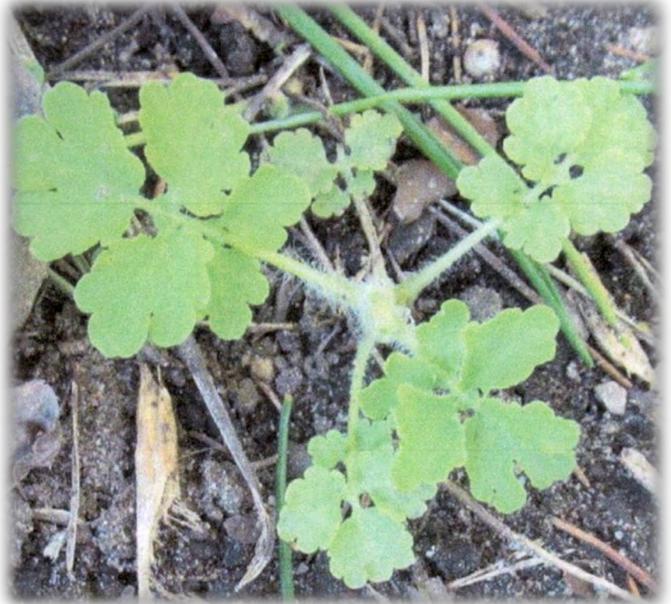
Angular wood poppy foliage

Gillian Boyd

The wood poppy's other common name, celandine poppy, comes from its resemblance to greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), a closely related European plant mostly regarded as a weed in Canada. In summer, the pinnate lobed leaves may look similar but when they emerge in spring, wood poppy leaves are clearly more angular compared with *chelidonium*.

Chelidonium has small single or double clusters of flowers which form long narrow seedpods that point upwards and ripen quickly. The plant is a prolific seeder. I have the double form by chance, taken from an unwanted weed patch under a friend's hedge because I liked the look of the foliage. Canadian wildflower handbooks make no reference to the double form but it is probably the variety 'Flore Pleno' which has become naturalized in parts of northeastern US. *Chelidonium* is toxic and deer-proof and has bright orange sap which stains hands and clothing if not protected.

The wood poppy flourishes in the US and it is virtually certain that the ones now available in garden



Rounded *Chelidonium* foliage

Gillian Boyd



Chelidonium

Gillian Boyd

nurseries across Canada were American in origin. Provided you live somewhere warmer than zone 4, wood poppies with their sunshine yellow flowers make a lovely addition to the spring shade garden.



Tip: To create a woodland soil, initially mix composted leaves into the existing soil. In subsequent years leave the fallen leaves and twigs as a mulch. To hold leaves in place on windy sites top dress with wood chips.



Gardener Beware: Yellow Archangel – Angel or Devil?

Gail Labrosse



Lamium galeobdolon with some lily-of-the-valley—*Convallaria majalis*
Kelly Noel

An archangel is a high-ranking angel but yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*) behaves like a devil when it escapes into forest habitats from residential plantings. It can spread quickly to form dense areas on the forest floor.

This native of Eurasia is a shade-loving, perennial groundcover, fast growing, adaptable to shade or sun and moist or dry soil. Are your alarm bells ringing yet? Non-native ground cover, fast growing, sun or shade, wet or dry soil equals an invasive species.

Yellow archangel quietly creeps out of its garden bed or pot undetected, then spreads quickly by stolon's or runners into nearby, undisturbed wooded areas. It colonizes and smothers native plants that provide habitat and food sources to wildlife.

It reproduces easily from stem cuttings, root fragments or seeds. So, when discarding these plant parts from your garden, use municipal or rural curbside waste pickup. Don't use your own compost for disposal. This will prevent spreading it around your garden accidentally in your compost.

The best control measure for this invasive plant is digging or hand pulling, if it is a small colony. For larger areas, use a mower or weed whip. But if the plants are in flower or have seed heads, bag and dispose of these in your garbage before you dig, pull, mow or whip the area.

Avoid the invasion of natural areas by planting native alternatives in your yard. Try one of these non-invasive, native choices: zigzag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*) or false Solomon's seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*). Canada mayflower (*Maianthemum canadense*) is also worth considering, although much smaller. ♻️

Tip: Planting Potted Trees/ Shrubs

When planting a newly purchased potted tree or shrub dig the planting hole in the shape of a square. Why in the shape of a square and not a regular circular shaped hole? Well, if you dig a circular hole, the tree roots tend to follow the shape of the circle and end up not spreading out into the surrounding soil thereby limiting the growth and health of the tree. With a square hole the roots may grow along one of the sides of the hole but when they run into an orthogonal side, they will tend to grow through it and out into the surrounding soil. A square hole is especially important if you have clay soil since the clay being denser will make it even harder for the roots to escape a circular potting hole.

Rob Stuart, MG

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Helplines - are monitored daily
Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for Identification.

Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and [Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website](#)



Clinics

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Talks and Events

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:
<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies using Zoom or other virtual meeting software. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization.

Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



Trowel Talk team:

Amanda Carrigan, Judith Cox, Julianne Labreche, Gail Labrosse, Ann McQuillan, Kelly Noel, Dale Odorizzi, Josie Pazdzior, Marion Runstedler, Rob Stuart, Sheila Currie, Gillian Boyd, Agnieszka Keough, Barbara Long, Heather Clemenson, Rebecca Last, Mary Ann Van Berlo, Stephanie Sleeth, Margaret Ryan, Mary Crawford,

Letters to editor: mgottawaeditor@gmail.com

Banner Photograph: *Amelanchier canadensis*—Susan Bicket

Tuesday, May 18, 7 pm

Judith Cox

Into the Night Garden

[Master Gardener Lecture Series, Friends of the Farm](#)

Wednesday, May 19, 7 pm

Rebecca Last,

Plant Guilds – taking companion planting to the next level – a look at the building blocks of permaculture.

[Kemptville Horticultural Society](#)

Wednesday May 19. 12:00,pm

Judith Cox -Master Gardener

Vegetable Gardening

[Ottawa Public Library](#)

Wednesday, May 26, 12:00 pm
Judith Cox
Gardening with Children
[Ottawa Public Library](#)

Wednesday, June 2, 12:00 pm
Julianne Labreche
Going Grassless
[Ottawa Public Library](#)

Wednesday, June 9, 12:00 pm
Rob Stuart and Catherine Disley
Container Gardening -Dramatic, Changeable and Forever Moveable
[Ottawa Public Library](#)

Tuesday, June 15, 7:30 pm
Julianne Labreche
Going Grassless – alternatives to grass lawns
[Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society](#)

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton present:

Planting for Success – May 18 Vertical Veggies - May 25
Containers 101 - June 1 Paint by Perennials - June 8
Tuesdays, 12:30pm – Live on Zoom



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Each Zoom session will include a presentation on the topic of the week followed by Q&A – 25-30 minutes total.

Click [here](#) to register for these meetings – attend as many as you can.