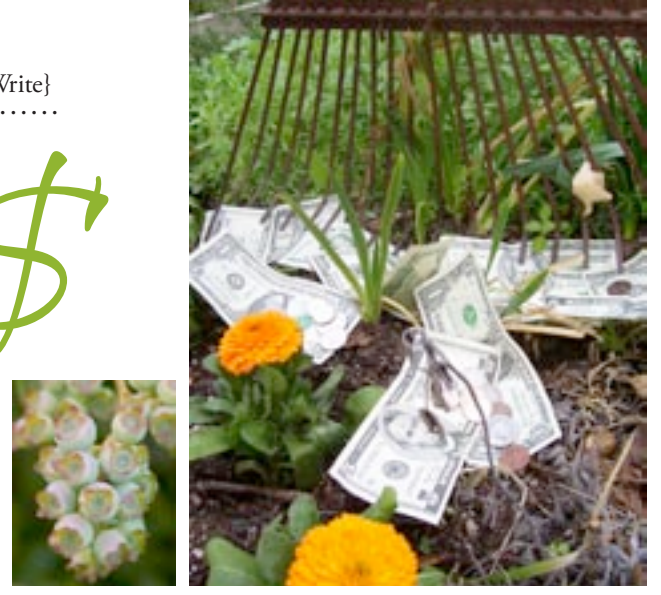


{Readers Write}

# GET MORE GREEN FOR YOUR \$

by Aenne Carver, California

Gardening is the number-one hobby in the U.S. While skeptics say that it requires too much work to be a hobby, we gardeners know better. Gardening is the best. But it does cost money. We fertilize, mulch, and buy plants. However, with creativity and gumption, you can have a beautiful garden for dirt cheap.



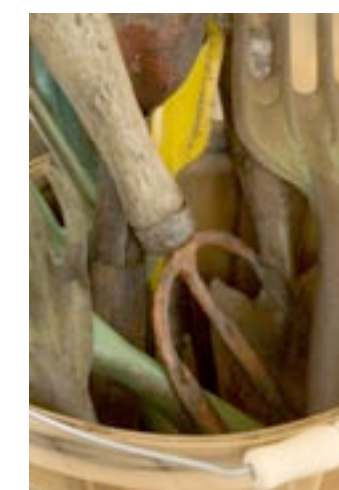
**Determine how plants grow for further savings.** For instance, the Americanized version of the shamrock is actually oxalis (*Oxalis acetosella*), which grows from a tuber. Tubers go dormant and then re-grow like a bulb. Grocery stores throw out their sickly looking shamrock plants after St Patrick's Day, and they're free for the asking.



**To begin frugally, start plants from seeds.** A packet of seeds purchased for \$2 can yield about 50 plants. Use eggshells and egg cartons to start your seeds. Place halves of clean eggshells into the egg carton and fill with a seed-starting mix. After the seeds sprout, plant both the shells and the seedlings—the shells will decompose.



**Gain dividends from dividing what you own.** Perennials benefit from dividing—without it, they take over garden beds or become overcrowded. Use newly divided plants to enhance other areas of the yard, and watch your investment of a few plants multiply into the backbone of your garden.



**Using mulch around plants conserves water and keeps weeds in check.** Tree trimmers will sometimes deliver wood chips for free, especially if you catch them already at work in your neighborhood. Or ask neighbors if you can rake their excess leaves or pine needles. Acid-loving plants, like camellias and azaleas, adore pine-needle mulch.

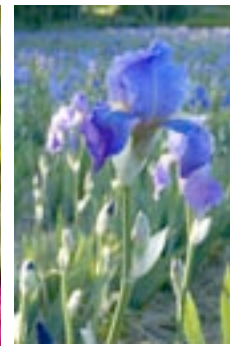
**Create a friendship garden from pass-along plants.** Not only are such beds inexpensive to make, but they give your garden history. Ask for cuttings and seeds from every gardener you know. Get more plants from people you don't know. Remember the gardener's proviso: "Happiness held is the seed; happiness shared is the flower."



**Get plants for cheap by purchasing on sale.** Don't judge a plant by its cover—plants on sale can look sick. But often, all they need is repotting and fertilizer. I bought a large cane begonia for \$3 that normally sold for \$20. In one month, it recovered and was gorgeous. Then I started baby plants to give away.



**Feed your plants for free—just look outside the fertilizer box.** Most coffee shops give away their grounds, which add low levels of vital plant nutrients to your soil. Find more free fertilizer in the form of manure from horse stables and chicken farms—the only catch is shoveling and transporting the smelly stuff. Let fresh manure sit for a while before using on your garden so excess salts can leach out. Or learn to make free compost to feed your plants (see "Compost 101" in our June/July 2011 issue).



So you see, gardening does not have to be expensive. Try a few of these tips and stretch your green dollar.

Read Aenne's gardening blog at [www.thethriftygardener.com](http://www.thethriftygardener.com).