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# GARDENING

& LIFE AT HOME: RENOVATIONS, DECOR, RESALE

A group of Calgary women spend a Saturday learning how to wire, plumb and find the right tool for the job  
**In Life At Home**  
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## DIG THIS

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### Win this and get digging

**CONTEST** • We're launching our first Gardening section of the season today, and to get you in the gardening groove, we're giving away some heavy-duty yard implements by Garant, and a box of four varieties of Olympic 2008 tulip bulbs from the Netherlands Flower Bulb Center. The tools in the prize package include:

- Excavator "ergo fit" shovel (at left)
- Total Control hatchet
- Planter's Buddy trowel.



To enter, log onto CalgaryHerald.com's Life At Home/Gardening link to answer a question from one of our gardening stories in today's paper. The deadline to enter is midnight, Sunday.

Be sure to include your name, telephone number and address. Only one winner will be randomly selected and contacted.

— Calgary Herald

### Mini rose sale

**EVENT** • It's that time of the year again for the Calgary Rose Society's Annual Mother's Day Rose Sale. The sale runs today from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 215 Lynnwood Dr. S.E. and at 443 19th Ave. N.E.

New for this year are one- and two-gallon hardy and tender roses as well as the new Artist Series, Emily Carr and Felix LeClerc.

Check the Calgary Rose Society's website at calgaryrosesociety.ca.

— Calgary Herald

### Fill up on free compost

**EVENT** • Load up on mushroom compost this weekend at Rol-land Farms' Essex Kent Mushrooms.

It's the 19th annual Gardener Appreciation Week and the giveaway is free mushroom compost until Sunday. Bring your bins and you'll get help loading up on this fertile growing mix.

Take Highway 2 north to the Crossfield/Drumheller exit. Go east half a kilometre to the service road. Turn right and follow the road back south to the entrance. Look for the sign in the field.

For more information, call 946-4395.

— Calgary Herald

# WELCOME SPRING



**DONNA BALZER**

## Despite crazy Calgary weather, we're blooming

**T**here were comments made when I planted pansies outdoors mid-April. I was laughing at myself when I mentioned it on CBC radio. It was a rare warm April day and as I planted them, people walking by passed on helpful tips like: "Isn't it a bit early for that?" or "Did you hear it was going to snow this weekend?"

Of course it snowed and temperatures dipped to -15 C, but once the snow receded the pansies were in bloom, greeting the

same skeptical walkers with their happy faces.

In full bloom right now along with the pansies are the early hardy perennials such as Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis* 'Flore Pleno'), Pasqueflower (*Pulsatilla patens* and *Pulsatilla vulgaris*), Liverleaf (*Hepatica* spp.), Squill (*Scilla sibirica*), many primulas (*Primula* spp.) and common crocus (*Crocus* spp.). Summer planting is still just a vision, but these early bloomers give enjoyment while the spring work is attended to.

My weekly column this year will be a sharing of timely tips. I expect to continue to learn new things and explore new ways to do old things every season. Of course, fashions are constantly changing and things I long ago dismissed are coming back into vogue, so I will report on trends as I see them. No doubt pink and red geraniums will continue to be fashion giants, but older perennials (now known as Heritage Perennials) are making a comeback and any plant that is disease-free or drought-tolerant will always be popular.

This weekend, the work is going to involve raking the lawn vigorously to take off old dead turf and spreading compost to

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For more Calgary gardening information and to read previous columns by Donna Balzer and Nora Bryan, click on the Life At Home/Gardening link at calgaryherald.com

ready the planting beds. One caller asked if he had to aerate his lawn or de-thatch it first. I told him aerating first is my preference. This pulls up little plugs of soil and the power raking or de-thatching — either by machine or hand with a stiff landscape rake — pulls off the extra dry grass and the plugs so the lawn can get a vigorous start. I compost the material from the lawn because the micro-organisms in the soil plugs accelerate compost. If the lot is uneven or needs nutrients, top-dress with compost right after de-thatching.

I have already pre-soaked my annual sweet pea seeds. They need 24 hours to absorb enough moisture before they are spaced out — a few centimetres apart — in the garden or in pots. Other early seeding that can

happen this weekend includes starting quick-growing annuals such as lavatera, cosmos, zinnia and nasturtiums. Some gardeners will direct seed these into the garden and if the space is small, this is advised. If a few seeds need to go a long way, they can be started indoors in little trays this weekend and transplanted outdoors by the end of the month once they get their first true leaves.

Fast-growing vegetables such as lettuce, kale, cabbage, broccoli, Swiss chard and squash can be started in seedling flats indoors or directly outdoors now. By starting some seeds — such as lettuce and chard — indoors and out, you extend the harvest period. It's too late to plant pansies now, only because within three weeks we'll be planting our real annuals and shortly after that time we'll want to start pulling out the pansies.

Follow this column for updates and e-mail me if you have a tip or timely topic to share.

BALZER IS A HORTICULTURIST, GARDEN CONSULTANT AND AUTHOR OF TWO BOOKS. SHE IS CO-HOST OF THE TELEvised BUGS & BLOOMS AND IS ALSO HEARD REGULARLY ON CBC RADIO. E-MAIL COMMENTS OR IDEAS TO DONNA@GARDENGURU.NET.



Tough early plants are pansies, top, Blue Siberian squill, left, *Sanguinaria canadensis*, middle, and *Hepatica acutiloba*, right. Photos courtesy, Donna Balzer



## Lawn is still king

Despite signs of its demise, that grassy patch in your yard has many benefits

**L**awns are a "guy" thing. There are theories to explain this — my favourite is that the suburban dad of the '50s craved something he could mould according to his complete will. All day he had to apply his talents according to the direction of some large corporation. At home, his multi-tasking spouse held dominion over domestic affairs. The lawn, at least, was his.

My take on this is that (the din of the mower notwithstanding) lawn care meant some private time away from clamouring offspring and demanding bosses.

There are more theories about why we've embraced short swathes of green as the default yard scape. Some scholarly theses start with the grassy savannas we found ourselves running around in after we came down from the trees. But it's easier to fast forward to the years after the Second World War, when regular people could afford suburban houses that came with lawns.

For much of civilized history, only the very wealthy could afford to have a lawn. With the advent of suitable grass seed mixtures, modern mowers, sprinklers and all kinds of other products, Joe Average and his neighbours could maintain lawns — but they remained a status symbol.

Still, we need another theory about why the lawn is not a meadow but more like a broadloom carpet. It goes like this: Grass is grass, so the only way to elevate your lawn to a higher status than the neighbours' is to make it more perfect.

But just in case you weren't much into keeping up with the Joneses, you could be guilty into keeping your lawn tip-top through dire messages in ads from lawn seed and care suppliers. After all, if your lawn was weedy, then perhaps the inside of your house was a mess too, and passersby might wonder how diligently you were raising your kids.

When I was little, lawns had clover, which attracted a delightful bumbling of bees. Lawns these days, at least those seriously maintained, bear not a trace of this or any other non-grassy plant. It would seem imprudent for suppliers of turf seed mixtures — who also sell herbicides — to add clover, because it will be promptly wiped out as you go after the dastardly dandelions with the helpful herbicide.

Clover used to be incorporated into turf mixture because, as a member of the pea family, it has the ability to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere into the soil.

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