

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

7/15/2009

## The River Ridge Report

Chris Beytes



Will folks buy our stuff this spring? Will they spend as much as they have in previous years? Will vegetable gardening be a hot trend?

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### **Nicholas Moschini**

*Ten-year-old Nicholas shows off a couple of giant zucchini from his dad's (Bill) tidy vegetable garden. We asked if he was going to eventually grow his own garden.*

*"No!" he shot back.*

*"If it's green, he doesn't eat it," explained his mom, Mary Moschini. "Corn, that's it."*

*Bill wasn't home, so we asked Mary what drives him to create such a nice garden.*

*"No clue. Honestly, I have no clue why." She asked her neighbor, Diane Salsini.*

*"He likes to play in the dirt, Mary. He's a boy!" she replied.*

*Then Mary pointed to a small vegetable garden at the house behind hers. "That's our neighbor's garden over there. He calls it the 'whoa!' garden because he can't remember what he planted, and it's going to be, 'Whoa! Green beans!'"*

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We can speculate about the answer ... or we can ask some people who know: the 356 middleclass American households that make up River Ridge, my South Elgin, Illinois, suburban neighborhood (median income: \$67,323).

If you've followed *GrowerTalks'* weekly email, Acres Online, you're well aware of the River Ridge Report, the twice-yearly survey of my neighbors and their gardening habits. I started the survey on a whim in 2004 and now have six years of data that show spring gardening participation varying between 63% to 70% of households. I determine this by studying the front yards of each home for signs of spring planting—hanging

baskets, containers and flowers planted in beds. My assumption is that anyone who gardens in the back yard will always put something out front.

But that visual survey doesn't tell me anything about how much they spend, or whether they spent more or less than previous years. Nor does it tell me about vegetable gardening, since that's a hobby that does not happen out front. So for 2009, in addition to my usual visual survey, I created a written survey and gave one to each of the 355 homeowners\* (along with a follow-up survey, in case they lost the first one). In it I asked if they garden; how much they spent; if they spent more, less or the same as last year; if they plant vegetables; where they plant them; and why they grow vegetables.

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***Diane Salsini and, her husband Chuck Balboa***

*"He doesn't like it when I cut out his grass, and his grass is insidious," says Diane. "If I cut out the grass, it means he has to weed-eat more."*

*"She makes a more technical cut for me," Chuck replies with a wide grin. "I try to keep it simple."*

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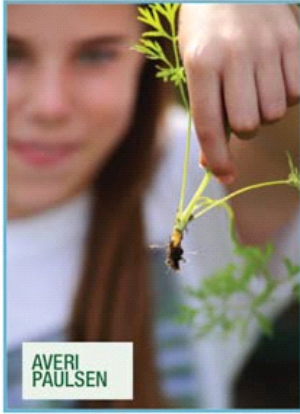
**The drive-by survey**

In my visual survey, I counted 232 homes that showed signs of buying spring annuals—that's 65%, up 2% from spring 2008! If we need any evidence that our industry is at least recession resistant, this is it.

According to the 2008 National Gardening Survey by the National Gardening Association, 70% of U.S. households participate in some kind of do-it-yourself lawn and garden activity. But that also includes lawn care—something I didn't ask about. Flower gardening comes in at just 31%. So River Ridge's 65% is admirably high.

What the 2009 River Ridge data don't show is that this year's gardening season had any unique characteristics because of the economy; actually, it reveals that the 2008 season wasn't so hot. And thinking back, it was a pretty wet spring in Chicago. That could also explain why hanging baskets and containers were up last year and in-the-ground gardening was at its lowest level. This year, those categories seem to be back to "normal."

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### **Averil Paulsen**

*Ten-year-old Averil reports that her first vegetable garden is doing “pretty good, really. There’s not much really happening other than carrots.”*

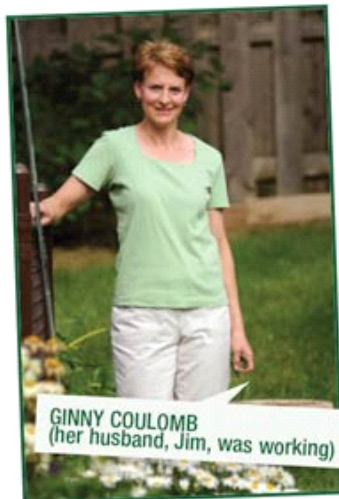
*And will she garden next year?*

*“I’m going to do it next year, probably,” she answers, then reveals that she’s already well-versed on crop rotations: “I’m not sure what I’m going to grow though, because you should really, like, keep switching.”*

I will also admit that, because of the drop in participation in 2007 and 2008, I was worried that I was seeing a downward trend in gardening. So I’m double thankful to see the increase this year.

If there is any long-term trend to note, it’s that containers are slowly edging out flower beds. Hanging baskets and containers both made strong showings compared to 2007 and 2006, while flower beds dropped off about 3% from those years.

However, serious gardeners (as I characterize anyone who gardened in all three categories) continue to make up about 17-18% of my neighbors, so it doesn’t seem that flower beds are losing favor with this group—only that casual gardeners are giving up flower beds for baskets and containers.



### **Ginny Coulomb** *(her husband, Jim, was working)*

*“I love beautiful things, and flowers are beautiful,” says new River Ridge resident Ginny Coulomb. The previous owners of her home barely mowed the lawn, but she’s added flower beds and window boxes and really spruced it up.*

*“I’d buy flowers no matter what,” she says of gardening even during tough economic times. “They make me feel good. And we don’t spend a lot on vacations and things like that ... I feel like they’re almost like a necessity to me.”*

## **The written survey**

Of the 355 paper surveys I gave out, I received 70 back—about a 20% response rate (I built a drop box and put it on the corner of my lot, with a fancy sign.) Of the respondents, 64 (91%) gardened this year, while 65 (93%) gardened last year. Only one respondent didn’t garden either year.

## **Here’s what we learned from those 64 gardeners:**

**Q. This year, roughly how much did you spend on plants and other gardening products?**

**A.** \$255 (high was \$2,000, low was \$7.50)

The NGA survey reports \$76 per household spent on flower gardening and \$444 spent on all lawn

& garden activities.

**Q. Despite the recession, did you spend more, less or the same as last year?**

**A.** 24% spent more, 23% spent less, and 53% spent the same

**Q. What plants did you buy for your garden?**

**A.** Annuals in flats/packs - 82%

Perennials - 64.5%

Vegetables/herbs - 50%

Annuals in small pots - 45%

Hanging Baskets - 40%

Trees/shrubs - 37%

Pre-made combination planters - 21%

What surprised me about the above answers is how dominant flats and packs continue to be, and how low pre-made containers are—especially in light of the high container figure (78%) in my drive-by survey. What this reveals is that most folks are planting their own containers, not buying pre-made ones.

**Q. Did you plant any vegetables this spring?**

**A.** 56% said yes, 44% said no

NGA's survey says 23% of all U.S. households participated in vegetable gardening. If 65% of all River Ridge households did some form of gardening, and 56% of those gardeners planted some veggies, that means 36% of all R.R. households participated in veggie gardening—well above the national average.

One of the main reasons for doing a written River Ridge survey was to track vegetable gardening habits. Now that we have a benchmark figure, we can see if this trend grows, declines or stays flat. Stay tuned for 2010!

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**Kevin and Debi McGlinn**

*Kevin and Debi McGlinn are widely known for their crazy sense of humor. Debi wrote on their survey form that they didn't vegetable garden this year because, "This year too busy ... still too cold ... Kevin still tending to his fireplace (what a pyro!)," she quipped. But when they do plant veggies, they "love to eat cherry tomatoes off the vine and share them with the neighbors ... who are too lazy and cheap to plant their own," Debi again joked.*

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**Q. Was this your first year to grow veggies?**

**A.** 14% said yes

That's 9.1% of total households. And if we compare that with the 27% who were not first-timers, then River Ridge saw a 33% increase in veggie gardening this year—helping support the notion that veggies are a hot trend.

**Q. Why did you decide to plant vegetables?**

**A. Freshness/flavor - 82%**

Family bonding/education - 50%

Health benefits of home grown - 44%

Save money - 35%

Other - 21% ("always plant," "fun," "cooking family recipes," "canning," "get seedlings from my dad," and "gift from kids")

I would have expected "save money" and "health benefits" to rank higher. But it's obviously all about flavor!

**Q. Did you plant in the ground or in containers?**

**A.** 59% in the ground only, 15% in containers only, 24% did both

While we think folks want convenience, when it comes to veggies, a traditional garden still rules.

But maybe that's because they don't know you can plant them in containers. It will be interesting to see if this number changes in future surveys.

**Why some folks didn't garden?**

Finally, what reasons did folks give for not gardening? I was hoping for more answers to that question, but as I noted, the vast majority of respondents did garden, even though I invited everyone to return the survey. The reasons they gave for not gardening? One was too busy. One said she's "not into gardens." And two said their lack of participation was due to finances or the recession.



**Pat Hancock**

*Pat lives on Hancock Street, which led me to ask if it was named for him ... as if he'd never heard THAT one before. Pat spent between \$1500 and \$2000 on his yard, which always looks fabulous. Why is he so into his yard? "My father was always a big yard guy, so I like doing it. It's relaxing, in a weird way. And so is washing my car. It's one of those things."*

**Home for sale**

Last year there were eight homes for sale in River Ridge, three of which were nicely dressed up with flowers. This year, just five on the market, but only one of those had flowers. Hasn't word gotten out yet that curb appeal starts with the stunning color that only our flowers can provide? I still think there's a great opportunity for garden centers or landscapers to work with real estate agents on this.