

The Spring River Ridge Report—Taking a Dip

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It was a tough spring in River Ridge



In my annual Weekend Rating, which just wrapped up a couple weeks ago, Illinois scored dismally: 5.7 out of 10 for the season, which tied for the second-lowest state scores in the U.S. (Minnesota was also 5.7; only Kansas, at 5.6, was worse).

I will use that as the excuse for why gardening in River Ridge hit a record-low this season, with just 52.5% of my neighbors showing signs of having bought plants. That's down from 58% last year, and nearly 10 percentage points below the new 12-year average of 62%.

With that somber news, welcome to the Spring 2018 River Ridge Report, brought to you by the fine folks at Sun Gro!

Here is the full chart showing participation overall and in the various categories:

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	12-year average
Households that garden	52.5%	58%	60%	66%	60%	60%	63%	68%	63%	65%	63%	68.5%	62%
Hanging baskets	41	40	34	38	43	42	41	42	43	47	48	43	42
Containers	82	80	76	62	80	82	71	66	83	78	77	77	76
Plants in the ground	25.5	25	24	24	23	27	28	35	32	47	42	50	32
All three	9	8	6	8	8	10	10	14	6	17	13	16	10

For those of you who are new to *Acres Online*, River Ridge is the Illinois subdivision where I've lived and gardened since 2001. It's middleclass, with 1/4 acre or smaller lots, 14 streets and 356 homes. My wife and I drive the neighborhood counting the baskets, pots and plants in the ground that we see in front yards. If we don't see anything that was planted this spring, they get a check in the "zip" column.

Weather was admittedly tough in northern Illinois this season. April felt more like February, with a good snowstorm April 9. There were no opportunities to start gardening early. May opened nicely, but then turned cold and wet for Mother's Day Weekend (that Saturday was 53F). Two weeks later, the three-day Memorial Day Weekend turned into summer, with highs in the upper 90s, and nobody wants to garden in those conditions. The next two weekends it rained.

Now, I'll admit, when I saw the 7.5 point drop, I gasped. That's the biggest one-year decline since 2008, when we went

from 68.5% down to 63%. But that I chalked up to the recession. By 2011 we were back up to 68% ... but then down to 63%, further down to 60% for two years, then a nice climb to 66% Like this spring's rollercoaster ride, gardening in River Ridge is a bit of a roller coaster, too. However, I don't like the overall downward trend I've been seeing. I hope it is an anomaly and we will get back up to 60% or above.

But before I get you feeling too gloomy, let's put it in perspective: The difference between last year and this year is just 20 households that decided not to garden. That doesn't sound as devastating as 7.5%.

Those who did garden ...



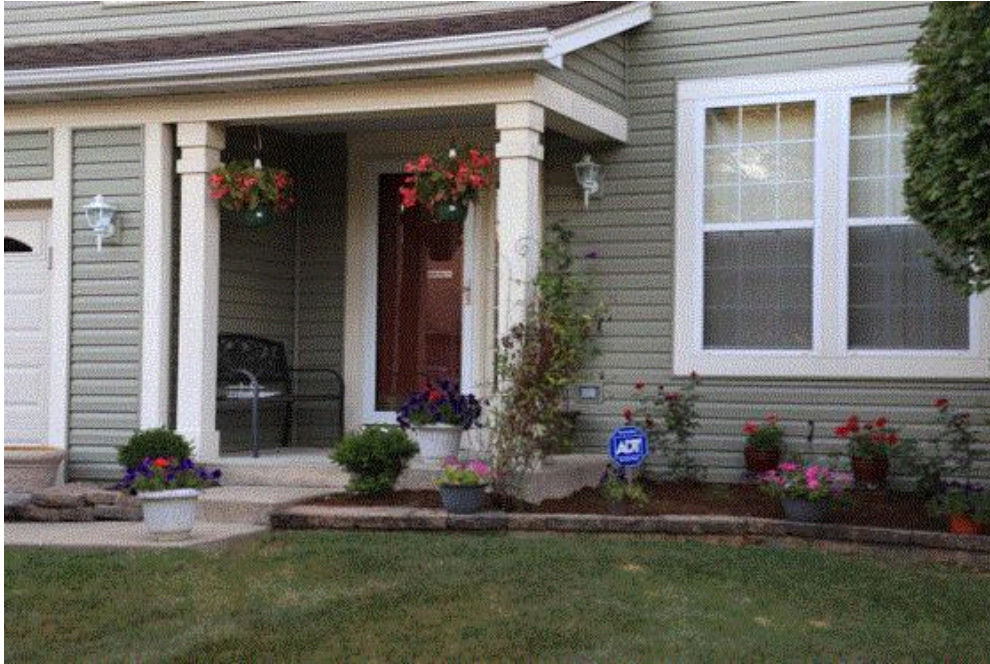
Mr. Hancock's house is always nice, with baskets, pots and plants in the ground.

Enough about the lazy, good-for-nothing ... oops! Sorry about that! I'm sure they have a valid excuse for not spending a few bucks on our lovely products. But let's talk about my 187 neighbors (52%) who did garden this spring, like Mr. Hancock, above. What did they garden with?

No. 1, as always, is **pots** of some form—window boxes, mixed combos, monoculture 6-in. pots ... 82% of those who gardened had one or more pots by their front door or walk. That's actually the second-highest result in 12 years, and 6 points above the average.

Did we note any container trends? Nope. River Ridge is a mixed bag of varieties and qualities and colors, from lackluster to spectacular (not too many fall into the latter category). A decent number of houses (we didn't count but will next time) had multiples of matching containers—such as pairs on either side of the garage.

Next comes **hanging baskets**, at 41% of gardeners. The average is 42%, and we've been as high as 48% (2008) and as low as 34% (2016). Not sure what might drive basket sales—perhaps local availability? To me, if you've got a hook or two on your front porch, you tend to always want to hang something from them, but maybe some years folks just don't get around to it. (And some years, they don't get around to taking down last year's dead plant.)



A home sporting pots and baskets.

Lastly, plants actually planted **in the ground**. A declining category since 2007, when fully half of those who gardened did so in beds. This year it's half of that, 25.5%, and it's been at about that level for the last half dozen years. I think it's a combination of hard clay soil, time, motivation and readily available finished pots and baskets at our local garden centers. Put 'em together and why bother digging? And hey, I can't say anything: When I checked the boxes for 1 S. Conway Ct. where I garden, I left "ground" blank, as you won't find any annuals in my beds.



Look! Actual annuals in a flowerbed! That's a rare sight these days.

My favorite category is **"All 3."** These are the serious gardeners, which this year amounted to 9% (18 households) who had pots, baskets and plants in the ground. The 12-year average is 10%, and we've been as high as 17% (2009, in the depths of the recession) to as low as 6% (2010). Why the drop between 2009 and 2010? Who knows?! Overall participation was high both years. Just the fickle nature of my neighbors, I reckon.

Random observations

- We counted five houses—possibly six—with fake flowers, up from four last year. I hope that's not a trend.



- Avid gardeners don't let me down. I can count on some homeowners to deliver every spring. Such as Bertha Mireles of 549 South Collins. I featured Bertha and her colorful display in the [2013 River Ridge Report](#), and she hasn't slacked off, as you can see below.

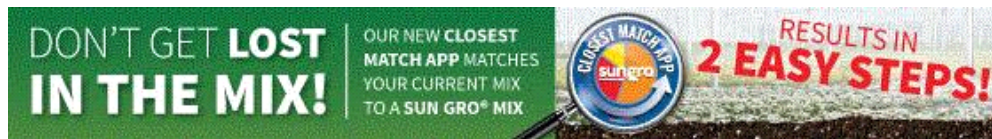


- Most popular annuals? The basics, like petunias, geraniums, marigolds and begonias. Purple fountain grass as a thriller. Saw quite a few Boston fern baskets.

- We noted what seemed to be a lack of basic maintenance at more houses than usual. Not that the whole neighborhood is going to hell in a handbasket—it's still a nice place to live! And not that the houses were for sale or empty—they weren't. But more beds filled with weeds than typical, even sometimes at houses with a pot or basket of flowers. Maybe the wet weather caused the weeds to get out of hand and they don't want to invest the time needed to pull them.

All in all, not a banner year in River Ridge, but I blame it on the weather. Come fall, we will see how Halloween decorating fares. And then we'll have the River Ridge Winter Greens Report in December.

Thoughts or comments about this year's report? Or have you done your own neighborhood survey? Let me know [HERE](#).



See you next time, in the regular *Acres Online*,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chi'.

Chris Beytes

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