The Spring River Ridge Report—2024 Edition

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Gardening in a typical Midwest neighborhood



This is my 21st Spring River Ridge report, but it's the first one I've written without having done one iota of gardening in River Ridge myself. That's because, as I believe I told you, last December I moved from River Ridge to a new neighborhood called Wedgefield* in Orlando, Florida.

However, relocation did not stop Laurie and me from flying back to Chicagoland for the July 4 weekend and driving to our old stomping grounds, clipboard in hand, to conduct our annual survey. I even met the chap who bought my house (he was giving the linden tree a much-needed thinning). And since I didn't live through the gardening conditions this spring, I asked a few experts for their recollections of the season.

But before we get into the details, a word from our long-time loyal River Ridge Report sponsor, Sun Gro Horticulture, the name that spells success in every garden! Since 1929, Sun Gro has blossomed from humble beginnings to become a leading supplier of soilless growing mixes, shipping more than 70,000 truckloads of premium product annually. That's right, folks—70,000 truckloads of greenhouse goodness, ensuring your plants thrive and bloom like never before! Every Sun Gro product is crafted to exacting standards, meeting high quality and performance criteria to help your crops grow strong and beautiful. Trust Sun Gro to provide the best for your plants.

Now, back to the River Ridge Report ...

River Ridge: Participation down

I recall telling Laurie as we were on our third or fourth street and I'd jotted down lots of containers and basket, "It feels to me like gardening is up in River Ridge." To which she replied, "It feels to me like it's down—have you notice how many 'zips' we've had?" (referring to those homes with no sign of spring gardening to be seen).

	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	10-year avg.
Households that garden	57.5%	61%	59%	65%	60%	58%	52.5%	58%	60%	66%	60%
Hanging baskets	40	43	46	46	40	46	41	40	34	38	41
Containers	86	78	80	77	81	80	82	80	76	62	78
Plants in the ground	13	15.5	18	20	35.5	21	25.5	25	24	24	22
All three	3	4.5	4.8	4	5.5	9	9	8	6	8	6

Well, she was right. Gardening in River Ridge was down by 13 homes, to 205 out of 356, or **57.5%**. Last year, 218 of my neighbors gardened, or 61%. Look at the historic chart and you'll see that's the second-lowest level of gardening in 10 years; indeed, it's the second-lowest since 2005, when this thing officially launched. That's bad … but it's not the biggest single-year decline I've seen, which is somewhat heartening. The chart shows a 6-point drop from 2015 and 2016; there was also a 5.5-point drop from 2007 to 2008 (from 68.5% to 63%).

Then I look at 2011 and see that it increased 5 points over 2010 … and then 2012 fell back to 63%, and the next year it dropped to 60%, and I don't know if I should be somewhat heartened or not. We don't seem to bounce back from these declines.

But who knows? Maybe it's an anomaly and we'll be back to our 60% average next year.

As for the reason, it wasn't weather. My reporters tell me it was a good gardening season overall, and the lawns and trees (and nearby corn and soybean fields) told us conditions had been fairly mild, with good precipitation.

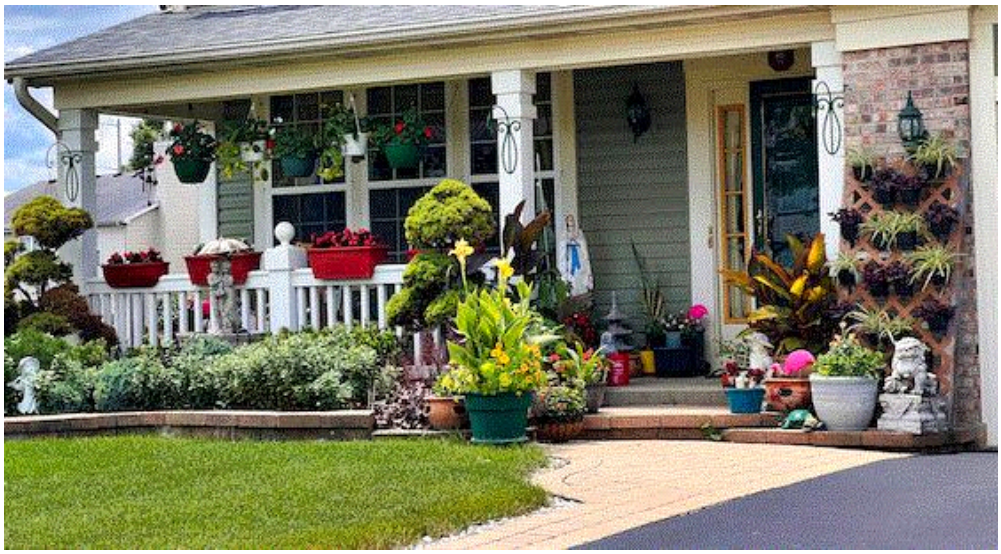
Jay Schrock, owner of Heinz Brothers Greenhouse Garden Center in St. Charles, River Ridge's nearest independent, said spring was solid. Recalls Jay, "Mother's Day Weekend was good. Memorial Day Weekend we had rain on Saturday, so that put a damper on Memorial Day Weekend sales. But overall we were up."

Spring started early, too, with April being Jay's second-best behind the pandemic year of 2021.

Tammy Hughes, a good friend, horticulturist, avid gardener and part-time employee of nearby Wasco Nursery, said, "I think it's been a decent gardening year. It started out early, it's been warm, we've had a decent amount of consistent rain … it's been a good year." Certainly, her garden looked great (we dined in it Saturday night).

How they garden: Pots

For the 205 households that did bother to invest in some gardening products, pots were by far the No. 1 choice, being displayed by 86% of gardeners (176 households out of 205). This number is the highest we've ever seen and it's up 8 points from last year.

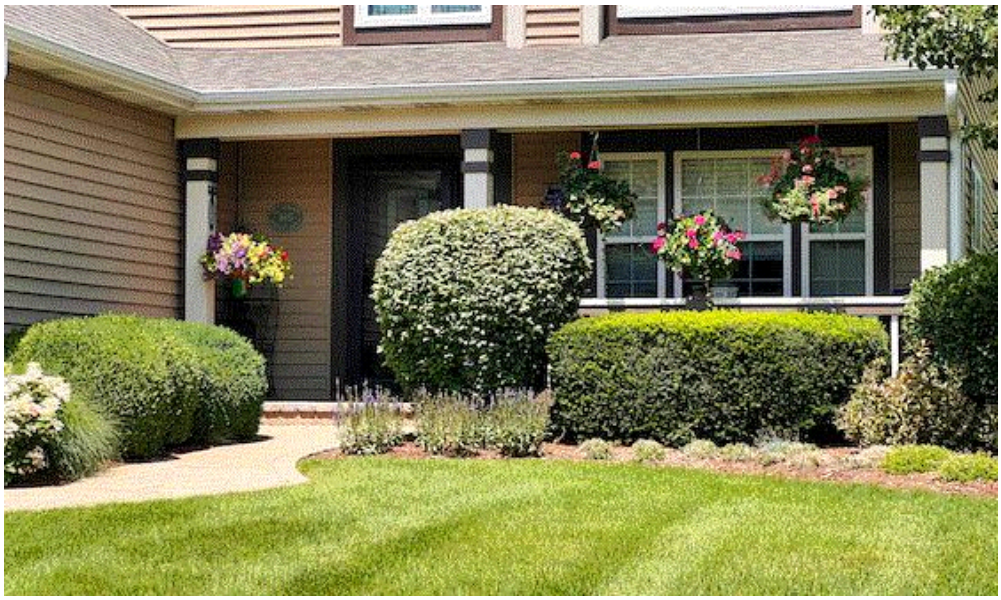


Every sort of container imaginable.

These always run the gamut, from picturesque urns, colorful ceramic and plastic window boxes down to a hanging basket with the hangers snapped off … or perhaps not—they just never got around to hanging it up. Some are big and some are the 4-in. pot the plant came in—regardless, if we see it on the front stoop or porch and it's not hanging, it counts as a container.

How they garden: Hanging baskets

Still popular, but only half as popular as regular pots, hanging baskets were displayed by 40% of my former neighbors who garden (81 households out of 205). Ferns, begonias, petunias and hybrid impatiens seem to be the favorite choices, although we did see some lush combo baskets, like these below.



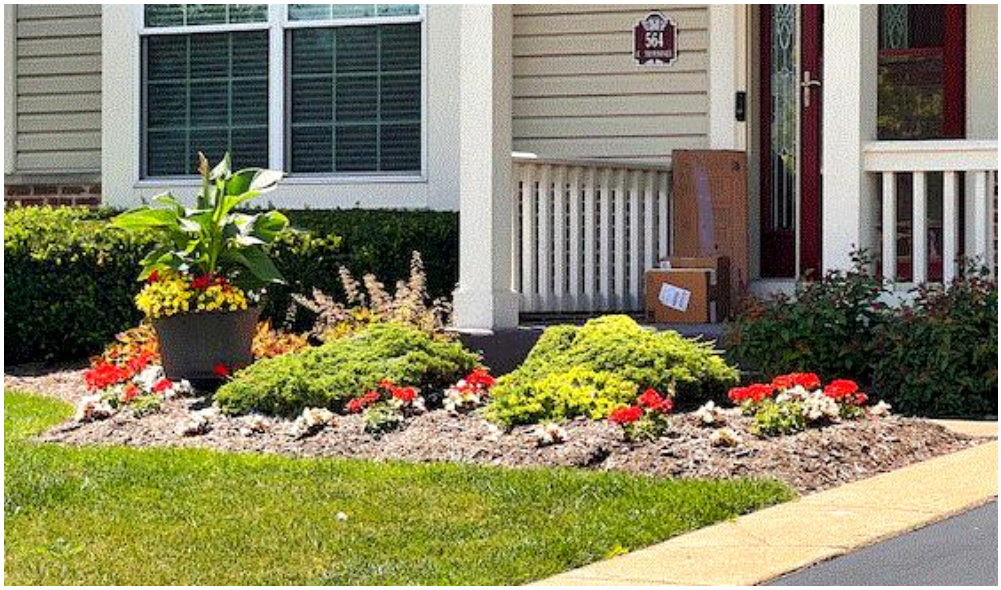
A nicer-than-average display of baskets.

How they garden: In the ground

Or perhaps I should say, “How they don’t garden,” because planting directly in the hard Illinois clay has never been all that popular in River Ridge. The practice peaked in year 1 of the pandemic, 2020, at 35.5%. Last year, it had declined to 15.5%. This year, we’re down to 13%, or 27 gardening households. Last year was the second time in a row we'd dropped below 20% and I asked them if the decline would continue.

I guess it has …

Still, I can’t blame folks for not wanting to get out and dig, not in the sort of conditions left by most builders and developers these days. (I am happy to say that my new Orlando soil, of which I have purchased nearly 300 truckloads, is ideal for planting in. I just haven’t had much time yet to do it!)

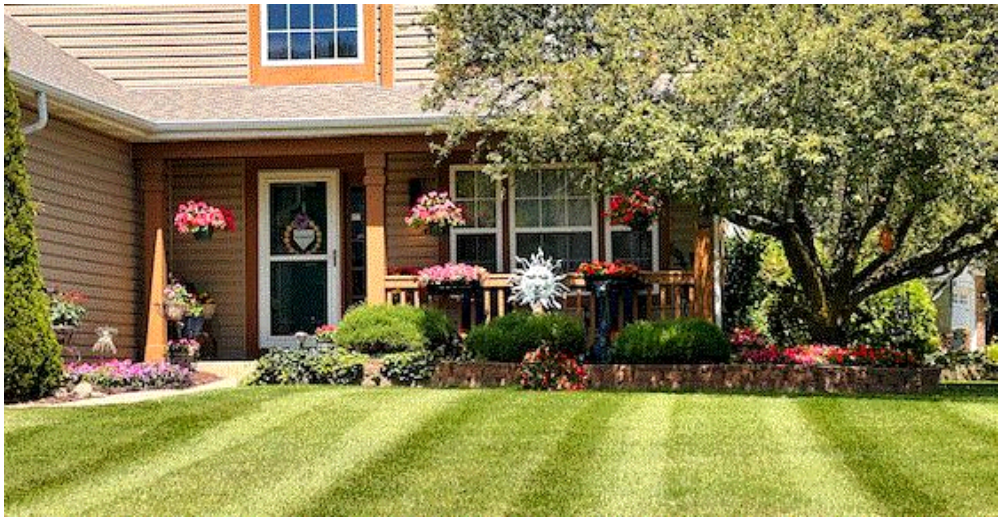


One of the 27 households that took the time and trouble to plant in the ground.

How they garden: All three

My favorite category, these are the avid gardeners who have pots, baskets AND plants in the ground. This specimen of homeowner is rare, only reaching double digits a few times in my survey. This time it hit rock bottom, at just 6 homes, or 3% of the 205 homes that gardened. That's down from 4.5% last year and is half the 10-year average.

And it's not like you have to create the Keukenhof to be in this category; some of these folks literally have just one pot, one basket and one pack of marigolds in the ground. But they get full credit. However, others put on a nice display worthy of the title "avid gardener."



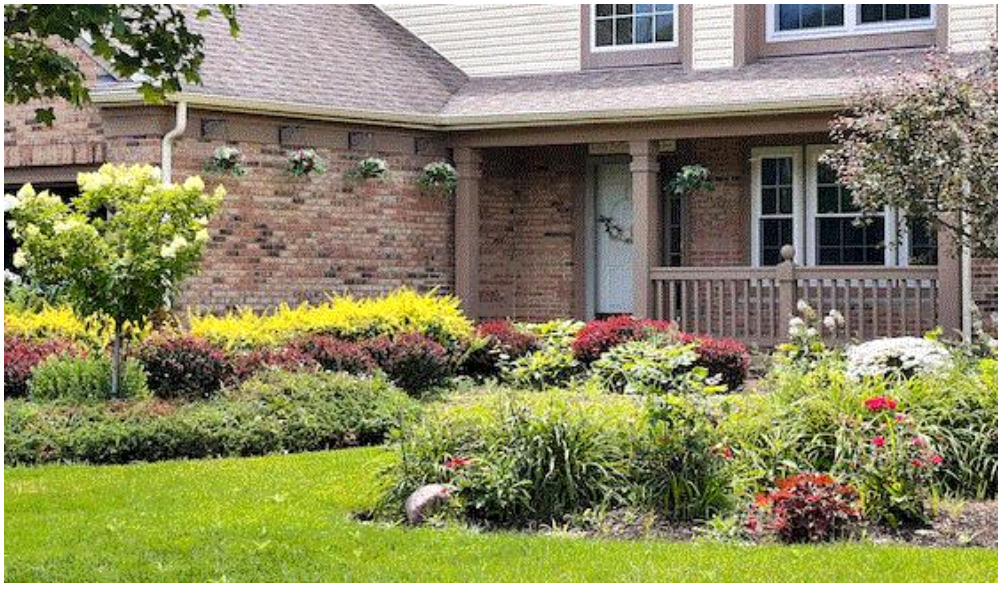
All three. Hurray for this neighbor for setting a good example!

Summing up …

I wasn't there to experience it, but it was a good spring for gardening in River Ridge. It started warm; stayed mild until June when, yes, it got real hot for a bit; it rained enough (including on Memorial Day Saturday, which sucked for retailers); and was mild again by July when I visited (it was 82F on July 5 at 2:00 p.m. when we were driving the 15 streets of River Ridge).

Why was participation down? No way to know. I guess this is when I hope folks DON'T do what I think they do, which is garden out back AND put a few things out front, too. Maybe they did garden, but it's all in the backyard. I don't try to find out.

But, wait, I just remembered something: We counted five houses displaying plastic plants. If those folks switched from real to fake, the count should have been 210 gardening households, or 59%, which is the same as 2022 and just a point below the 10-year average. And one of the homes used to be owned by a very avid gardener who planted loads in the ground.



This home used to be owned by an avid gardener who would hang real baskets from those hooks.

So maybe that's what happened?

Let's hope plastic plants is not the latest trend!

**Why not a Wedgefield Report? Because Wedgefield covers 23.3 square miles and has a population of 2,604 households. And we garden in the winter here.*



See you next time!



Chris Beytes
Editor-in-Chief
GrowerTalks and *Green Profit*
beytes@growertalks.com