It's the Spring 2026 River Ridge Report!

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Gardening down ... but containers up



It was 76F, humid and overcast on the afternoon of July 5 when my right-hand man, publisher Paul Black, and his perspicacious wife, Annie, piloted their Honda Pilot around the 15 streets of River Ridge, my old neighborhood in South Elgin, Illinois, studying the gardening habits—or lack thereof—of its 356 households.

The results? I'll reveal those in a moment. But, first, a word from our stalwart sponsor, **Sun Gro Horticulture**. Friends, when it comes to potting mixes, you look for proof, not promises. That's why Sun Gro trials matter. For 96 years, Sun Gro has delivered quality and consistency that growers across North America rely on—performance backed by innovation and innovation backed by results. With guidance from regional grower specialists, every stage of cultivation gains clarity and confidence. Experience the Sun Gro difference.

Now, back to the news … in this case, the bad news:

Gardening was DOWN in River Ridge this spring—from 212 households (59.5%) in 2025 to 195 households (55%) in 2026. But 2025 was up from 2024, which was down from 2023, which was up from 2022, which was … well, here's the chart, and the overall participation figures and the three gardening categories:

	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	10-year avg.
Households that garden	55%	59.5%	57.5%	61%	59%	65%	60%	58%	52.5%	58%	59%
Hanging baskets	37	41	40	43	46	46	40	46	41	40	42
Containers	83	79	86	78	80	77	81	80	82	80	81
Plants in the ground	7.5	16	13	15.5	18	20	35.5	21	25.5	25	20
All three	2	4	3	4.5	4.8	4	5.5	9	9	8	5

I'd never noticed the up-one-year-down-the-next trend we've been on since 2020. Earlier results showed longer periods of decline interspersed with brief gains. Now it seems every year is a swing. Perhaps there's always a handful of folks who decide not to bother, then feel they missed out and so next season they jump back in? I don't know. We'll just have to see if 2027 jumps up a few points …

Now on to how they gardened.

Paul and Annie spotted **hanging baskets** at 73 out of 195 gardening houses (37%). That's down from 41% last year and below the 10-year average of 42%. But it's not the lowest HB figure ever—that distinction belongs to 2016's 34%.

It might also be a point or two lower than it should be due to how we count baskets. You see, some folks buy baskets … but then they never get around to hanging them up. There they sit, on the porch, for the whole season. Paul said they spotted a few such examples and counted them as containers, not HBs.

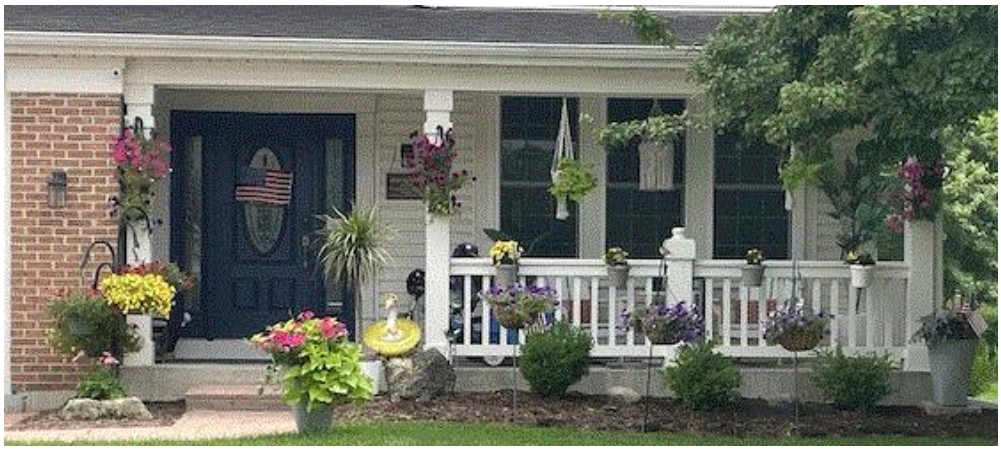
The most popular method to garden in River Ridge has always been **containers**—whether a simple 8-in. pot of petunias or an ornate urn with an extravagant combo planting. And that trend has NOT reversed: Containers are up 4 percentage points to 83% (162 of 195 gardening households). That's up from 79% last year and 2 points above the 10-year average of 81%.



A patriotic display with two containers (and a hanging basket).

Granted, those few HBs that Paul and Annie counted as containers might have pushed the number up very slightly, but does it really matter? It's the second-highest container figure in the 22-year history of this survey, only behind 2024's 86%. Containers remain the vessel of choice for River Ridge gardeners.

Gardening **in the ground** is where gardening has gotten hard for my old neighbors—literally. Only 7.5% of gardeners showed any indication of putting plants directly in the ground—the biggest one-year drop we've ever noted. Last year the figure was 16%. The 10-year average is 20%. Dismal!



We *think* the gerbera on the left, behind the rock, is planted in the ground (which would put these folks in the hardcore gardener category).

Back in the day, my former neighbors did garden in the ground to a reasonable extent back in 2016 (24%) or 2006 (49%). But think about it—that's a generation ago! Today's 35-year-old Millennial homeowner was 15 back when her

Gen-X mom was putting a spade to earth. I just don't think today's harried, distracted consumer wants the trouble.

Or consider this: As you can see from the 10-year chart above, we had a good number of in-the-ground gardeners in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Then in 2020 the pandemic hit, folks were stuck at home all spring and gardening really took off, with 35.5% of them planting in the ground. But there's been a distinct decline since then. Did they burn out on "real" gardening? Did they discover the ease of pots or decide to pursue other hobbies or adventures after that record-breaking gardening year of 2020?



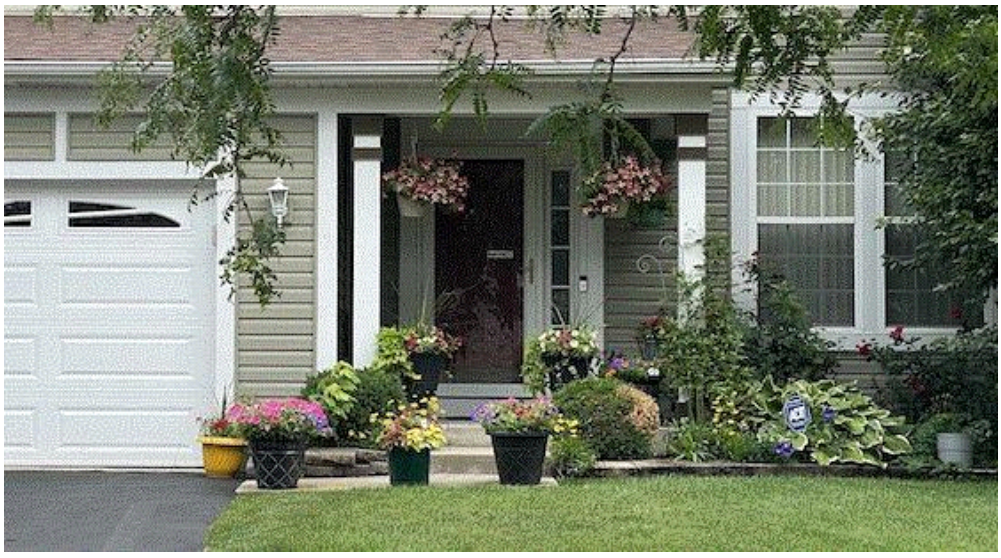
Perhaps perennial phlox have replaced annuals for this gardener.

I just had one more thought: blooming shrubs and perennials. River Ridge is a maturing neighborhood—I bought one of the last lots in 2001, so we're talking 25- to 30-year-old homes and gardens, and I note in Paul's photos a lot more shrubbery and perennials than perhaps was there 10 or 15 years ago. That could be enough to replace at least some of those in-ground annuals I used to see. Then again, I still see plenty of open mulched spaces that could accommodate a pack or two ...

Let me know HERE what you think the reason is.

Hardcore gardeners. These are the folks that have all three: baskets, pots and plants in the ground, and they are few and far between in River Ridge. This year, the number was four. Not 4%. Literally four households out of 195 where Paul and Annie spotted all three modes of gardening, which is 2%. That's down from 4% last year and 3% the year before. As you can see from the chart, it's never been a big number, averaging 5% over 10 years, 7% over 16 years and peaking at 14% way back in 2011 (again, a different generation of gardeners).

A bit less hardcore, 42 of 195 gardeners (21.5%) did display both containers and hanging baskets. So let's give them some points for supporting our industry!



Two out of three (plus a lot of perennials) still makes a nice display.

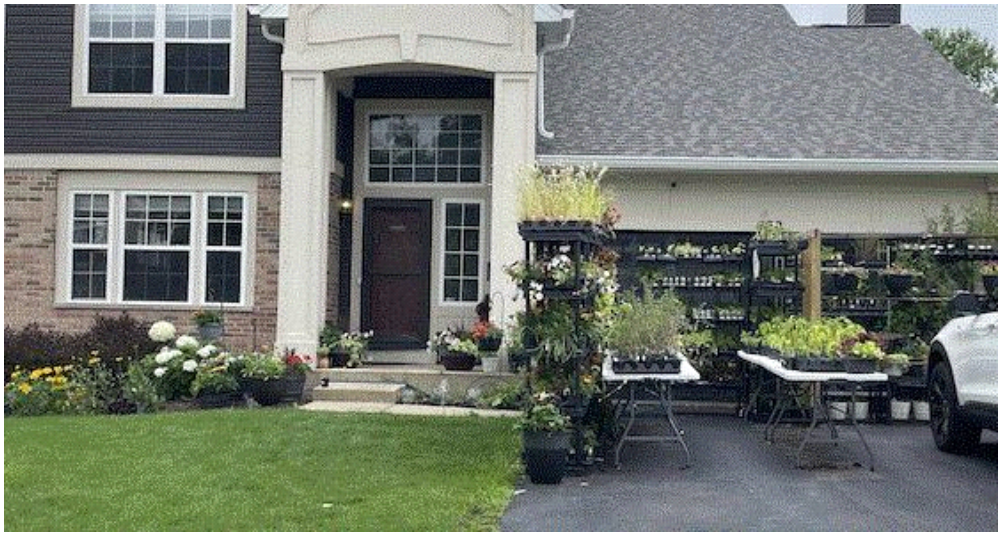
It’s the weather … except when it’s not

Lastly, a note about the conditions that could have led to lower gardening participation, but I don’t think did. My friend JP (I know his formal Dutch name, but he prefers JP), owner of Countryside Flower Shop, Nursery & Garden Center, a great independent just 30 minutes or so north of River Ridge, sent me a Spring Sales Survey score every weekend without fail. His reporting indicates a lot of rain, cold and frost in mid-April, but excellent conditions in late April. Then the first half of May was frosty and cold, which he said had folks delaying purchases. He scored Mother’s Day 9.5, but said it was still in the 30sF in the mornings. Then it got awesome from mid-May onward, with him scoring both May 22-23 and Memorial Day Weekend a 10.

“Great weather = great sales,” he wrote.

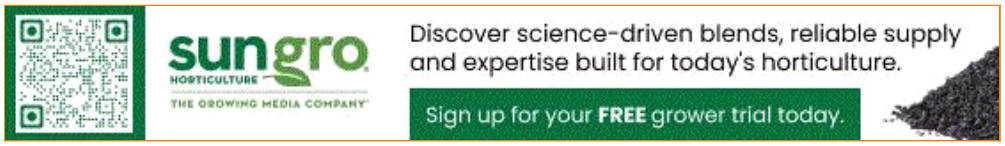
So weather would not have been an excuse for my old neighbors.

And, interestingly, availability of plant material certainly isn’t. Not only are there plenty of box stores and grocery stores with seasonal pop-ups and several good garden centers, but one of the neighbors has set up a nursery in his/her driveway. How’s that for convenience!



Appropriately, the neighborhood nursery is also one of the four homes with plants in pots, hanging baskets and in the ground—note the dusty miller to the right of the step.

Anyway, that’s River Ridge for Spring 2026. Paul and Annie will be back at it this fall, spying on my former neighbors' Halloween decorating habits. Stay tuned!



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



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