

TAYLOR'S WEEKEND GARDENING GUIDES

The Cutting Garden

Plants for gorgeous bouquets all year long

ROB PROCTOR



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Proctor, Rob.

The cutting garden / Rob Proctor.

p. cm. — (Taylor's weekend gardening guides)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-395-82945-3

1. Flower gardening. 2. Cut flowers. 3. Flowers. 4. Flower
arrangement. I. Title. II. Series.

SB405.P885 2000

635.9'66—dc21

99-28990

Printed in the United States of America

WCT 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Deborah Fillion

Cover photograph © by Rob Proctor

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston • New York 2000



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1 — DESIGNING THE CUTTING GARDEN 7

CHAPTER 2 — PLANNING AND MAINTAINING THE CUTTING GARDEN 21

CHAPTER 3 — SPRING FLOWERS 31

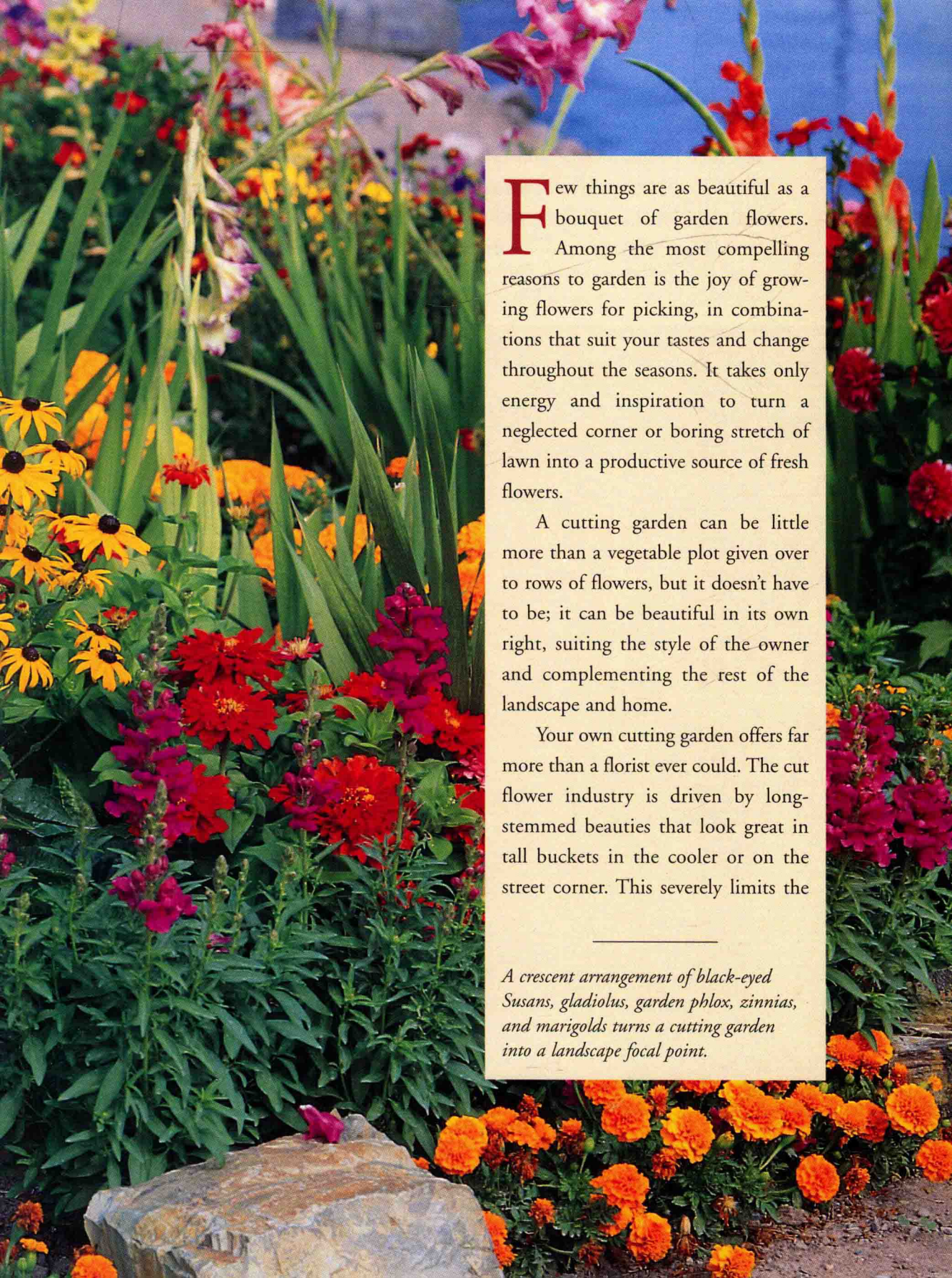
CHAPTER 4 — SUMMER BOUNTY 49

CHAPTER 5 — AUTUMN GLORIES 83

CHAPTER 6 — CUTTING AND ARRANGING 101

CHAPTER 7 — ENDLESS SUMMER 107

INDEX 115



Few things are as beautiful as a bouquet of garden flowers. Among the most compelling reasons to garden is the joy of growing flowers for picking, in combinations that suit your tastes and change throughout the seasons. It takes only energy and inspiration to turn a neglected corner or boring stretch of lawn into a productive source of fresh flowers.

A cutting garden can be little more than a vegetable plot given over to rows of flowers, but it doesn't have to be; it can be beautiful in its own right, suiting the style of the owner and complementing the rest of the landscape and home.

Your own cutting garden offers far more than a florist ever could. The cut flower industry is driven by long-stemmed beauties that look great in tall buckets in the cooler or on the street corner. This severely limits the

A crescent arrangement of black-eyed Susans, gladiolus, garden phlox, zinnias, and marigolds turns a cutting garden into a landscape focal point.



selection. Height is not a primary consideration for the home gardener, who may find joy in a coffee mug of pansies on a desk, a tiny jar of lily-of-the-valley on the night stand, or a sugar bowl stuffed with spicy sweet peas on the breakfast table. Many gardeners also like floating a blossom or two in a pretty China dish or rose bowl.





In spring, there are bouquets of glory-of-the-snow, primroses, and hyacinths waiting outside to be picked. Daffodils and tulips come in waves (if you splurged last fall) and at a bargain price compared with the florist's. Sunny weather brings out perennials like peonies, iris, and columbine. Well-selected shrubs and trees provide a wealth of flowers for cutting as well—from forsythia, quince, and apple blossoms that can be forced to bloom ahead of schedule indoors, to lilacs, bridal veil, and mock orange. These extend the boundaries of the cutting garden to include the entire home landscape.

Even before the spring bulbs and early perennials finish, activity intensifies in the cutting garden as the gardener sows annuals and summer-flowering bulbs. The seeds of sunflowers, zinnias, and bachelor's buttons are easy to germinate, providing armloads of flowers for picking in a short time. Easy bulbs and bulbous plants include gladiolus, sweet-smelling acidanthera, liatris, and tuberose. It's also time to sow everlasting flowers—annuals that can be cut and dried—such as strawflowers (*Helichrysum bracteatum*), globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*), and annual ornamental grasses.

Gardeners can customize their freshly picked bouquets by selecting and growing plants in colors they most enjoy. Pastel lovers can concentrate on shades that complement their interior décor, while people who love bright colors can throw caution to the wind. Each bouquet presents the opportunity to create a personal expression from the bounty of the cutting garden.

Perennials that bloom over an extended period—Indian blanket (*Gaillardia aristata*), tickseed (*Coreopsis* spp.), and pincushion flowers (*Scabiosa* spp.)—carry through the summer heat in many areas of the country. As autumn arrives, the cutting garden continues to produce. Black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*), mums, and asters flower profusely. Pumpkins, squash, gourds, berries, pods, and autumn foliage add another dimension to homegrown arrangements, especially for Halloween and Thanksgiving displays. The autumn abundance may remind the gardener to plant both perennials and bulbs for next season.

In winter—surrounded by bouquets of everlastings—a gardener takes on the pleasant task of searching seed catalogs for new varieties for the coming year.

*Plump 'Blue Jacket' hyacinths and brilliant
'Orange Sun' tulips make spring flower
arrangements easy.*



But even at this time of year for gardeners in cold climates, the cutting garden provides a source of intriguing material. Rose hips, winterberries, and desiccated seedpods add texture to arrangements with glossy holly, fragrant conifers, and sleek branches of red-twig dogwood.

An art degree isn't necessary to create beautiful homegrown arrangements, but some practical gardening knowledge is. Selecting the right site for your cutting garden is important. Evaluating and amending the soil is just as important. A few months in the garden will make you adept at sowing seeds, transplanting perennials, watering, fertilizing, and staking, but I'll give you some tips to help you get started. In addition, I'll also explain when and how to cut flowers and condition them for long-lasting arrangements.

In this book, I have highlighted classic annuals, bulbs, perennials, vines, and woody plants that perform admirably across much of the nation in a variety of conditions. I have avoided novelty hybrids or introductions that may become obsolete within a few years. Flowers that fare poorly in a vase aren't mentioned, but if you have a particular favorite, it's worth experimenting to see if you can make it last. Otherwise, be content to enjoy it outside.



Tickseed (*Coreopsis*)



The zigzag pattern on the petals of Gaillardia aristata shows why it's commonly called Indian blanket; lime green flowering tobacco accompanies it in the cutting garden.





CHAPTER 1

DESIGNING THE CUTTING GARDEN

A cutting garden can take many shapes. For gardeners with plenty of space, the ideal way to create a cutting garden may be to select a special spot and plan the garden there. For those of us for whom space is a more valuable commodity, it's a matter of finding a creative way to squeeze a cutting garden into the existing layout. There's always a way. Maybe the old vegetable garden needs a makeover (the joy of growing zucchini often pales over the years), or there's no need for the space once reserved for the kids' swing set and sand pile. Perhaps a tree has died and opened up a new area. Maybe you could put that neglected area by the garage to good use.

Most of us have more than we think if we dare to encroach upon the lawn. If I were looking for a site in my own yard, my immediate thoughts would go to what I grandly call the "croquet lawn," though in six seasons we've yet to play a single game there. I'd claim the middle of it for a cutting garden. (Since I already have several cutting areas in my overstuffed garden, my musings are hypothetical until I actually get out a shovel to attack the lawn.)

A crisp white picket fence encloses a cutting garden filled with bachelor buttons, purple coneflowers, cosmos, sunflowers, and silver artemisia.



Pick a sunny site. Not everyone has a site where the sun shines from dawn to dusk, but four or five hours ought to suffice for most sun lovers. Even a shadier spot can provide a wealth of flowers if you choose wisely and forgo the cosmos and sunflowers.

I've always thought that a proper cutting garden benefits from an enclosure of some sort. Many gardeners employ an enclosure for an herb or rose garden; a cutting garden can use one as well. A picket fence, a low stone wall, wattle fencing of woven willow, rustic cedar planks, or clipped hedges announce that some special sort of gardening is happening within. A fence of some sort also provides support for climbers as well as plants that often need staking such as dahlias or delphiniums. It's much easier to run some twine along the length of a fence to hold up these easily broken plants than to stake each one individually. Even a simple wire fence can be covered with a cloak of sweet peas or climbing roses, turning a utilitarian object into a thing of practical beauty. A fence may also keep out rabbits, deer, or other wildlife that would find the contents of a cutting garden tempting. Arbors and trellises add more opportunities to beautify the garden and grow climbing plants for cutting.

Inside the enclosure, there are a number of ways to proceed with the plan. It's practical and pleasing to divide a space into a pattern, with paths for walking and for working. A simple square, for example, may be easily divided into four equal parts with a walkway dividing them. Add a diamond in the center and the plan becomes more intricate. Play with half-circles and rectangles and suddenly you've created a parterre. I would certainly play with all this on paper before I started to lay it out in brick or stone. I used cedar fence pickets to work out the design in my own cutting garden, laying them out to show the beds and paths before I bricked the edges. Keep your beds small enough that you can reach into the center of the bed without stepping into it and compacting the soil.

Many gardeners make a parterre out of raised beds. This has a number of advantages, the main two being able to fill the beds with wonderful topsoil and ease of maintenance for those who dislike stooping and bending. Like ordinary beds, raised beds may be positioned in any pleasing manner, depending on the gardener's carpentry skills. Gardeners with heavy clay soils can use raised beds to provide their cutting beds with good topsoil without carting off the underlying clay. About eight inches of good topsoil in a raised bed is enough for most plants.



A raised bed provides armloads of feverfew, sweet Williams, daisies, and globe thistle for cutting.

