



Fanciful fairies

Add a little fairytale whimsy to your garden

MARIA SONNENBERG
FOR FLORIDA TODAY

The little people are standing tall these days, thanks to the popularity of fairy gardens, Lilliputian environments that through the years have fascinated young and old alike. The concept may be old, but lately fairy gardens have gained a whole new generation of devotees.

"They've been around for generations and their popularity comes and goes, but this time around it shows no sign of letting up," said Holly Fournier, manager of the greenhouse at Rockledge Gardens and the nursery's official fairy gardenmeister. "It's gardening in a small way."

The tiny habitats are so popular at Rockledge Gardens that owner Theresa Riley instituted an annual Fairy Garden Festival three years ago.

"We were totally unprepared for how popular it was," said Liz Lark-Riley, the Garden's director of marketing and events.

This year's Fairy Gardens Festival will be a two-day event May 20 and 21, and you better start registering for the build-your-own workshops for kids and adults, because Lark-Riley expects the spaces to fly as fast as Tinkerbell, who, by the way, will make an appearance for photo ops.

It's no mystery what draws kids as well as adults to the fairy havens in a pot.

"There is something delightful about the miniaturization," said Lark-Riley. "For children, it's a way to create a special world. For adults, these gardens offer a meditative opportunity."

Fairy gardens are miniature gardens evolved to the next level. They allow gardeners total control of a world of their own design, albeit a minuscule one. Tailor made for the condo or apart-



PHOTOS BY MALCOLM DENEMARK
/FLORIDA TODAY
A new trend in gardening is fairy gardens. Rockledge Gardens has an assortment of small fairy figurines and tiny plants for the gardens.

IF YOU GO

When: Saturday, March 20 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday, May 21 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: Rockledge Gardens, 2153 U.S. Hwy. 1, Rockledge

Highlights: Build-your-own-fairy garden workshops for children and adults, fairy garden scavenger hunt, food trucks, visits by Tinkerbell and fairies from Fern Gully. Visitors are encouraged to dress in fairy costumes.

Cost: Admission is free, but fee for build-your-own workshops is \$10 (\$15 at the door) for children and \$35 for adults in advance. All materials will be supplied. Registration is required for adult workshops.

Call 321-636-7662 for more information.

ment dweller, the gardens also work well in expansive backyards, because this world can be as small or as large as you want to make it.

"If you have a yard, you can make a fairy garden using a raised bed," said Fournier, recalling a former customer who built an entire fairy town in her backyard.

The size of the layout depends on the size of the figures you select, because fairies and their close cousins, gnomes, come in all shapes and sizes.

A fairy garden pro such as Fournier can act as your fairy environment contractor, building customized setups to your specs at prices that range from around \$30 to more than \$100.

For the DIY fan, Fournier is a fountain of fairy garden wisdom and ready to answer any questions. Start with the container, she suggests.

"Thrift shops are great for finding an interesting container," she said.

Prepare the vessel for smooth sailing with activated charcoal and a little stone underneath the potting soil.

"The stones aid in drainage and the charcoal filters the water, so you don't get a musty smell," she explained.

The type of container you choose will dictate the type of plants that will

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thrive there. Succulents, for example, hate containers without proper drainage, while ferns tolerate them.

For plants, head to the babies, the two-inch plants that sell for as little as a dollar in their infancy. Because these are young plants, they will hopefully grow out of the garden's scale eventually, so just replant somewhere else and buy new ones.

"The whole idea is to choose plants that look like miniature versions of the larger ones," said Fournier.

For example, gardeners cannot err with Neanthe Bella palm for their fairy gardens.

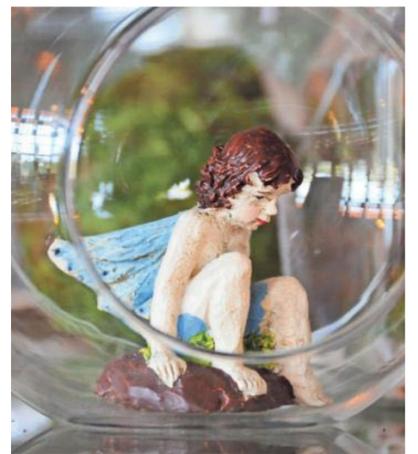
"It looks like a cute little palm tree, so it's very popular for fairy gardens in the Brevard," said Fournier.

After the plants are settled into their new fairy home, then the fun truly begins, with accessories that include cute-as-a-button houses, tiny bicycles, picket fences and gravel walkways created with scaled-down versions of rocks.

Like potato chips, it's hard to have just one fairy garden, so enthusiasts often diversify to additional tableaus that include a farm complete with barn and animals or Southwestern scenes with wagon wheels and cow skulls as accents. Fairies must live in the North Pole, too, because there are fairy gardens with igloos and polar bears.

Add the figures of your choice and the magical beings will take it from there with their fairy dust, which you may not see, but is definitely apparent in their enchanting miniature green world.

"The sky is the limit with fairies," said Fournier.



MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY
Fairy gardens can take on any theme you like. These little creatures can live in a forest, the Wild Wild West or even the North Pole.

WEED CONTROL STARTS WITH THE SEEDS

DEAN FOSDICK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

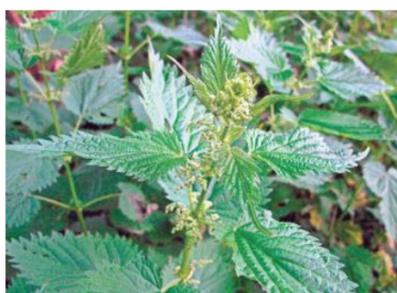
Weed seeds are among the most patient organisms in nature. Many weeds can produce thousands of seeds per plant per year, and those seeds might lie dormant for decades, just waiting for the right conditions to sprout.

If you want to control weeds, then find where these seeds accumulate — in "seed banks."

"Gardeners should care because that's where all their seeds are coming from," said Ed Peachey, a weed science specialist with Oregon State University Extension. "If you don't prevent weeds from producing seeds, then you'll wind up with large seed banks, and always fighting with the weeds that emerge from those seed banks."

Weeds are unwanted because they are considered unattractive in manicured yards, they spread quickly, and they muscle aside desirable plants from life-giving sunlight, nutrients and moisture.

"Understand what you have in your garden and then decide what to get rid



This stand of stinging nettles is beginning to produce seeds. Cut off the seed heads if it's too difficult to dig out the plants to prevent noxious weeds from spreading out of control.

of," Peachey said. "Some weeds are incredibly well adapted to gardens and they compete."

Weed seeds or banks accumulate in neglected lawns, near downspouts and shaded areas, around pathways and driveways, in newly cultivated ground — even under decks, despite the scarcity of sunlight.

Weeds have a number of things in

common, said Sandra Mason, an extension horticulturist with University of Illinois Extension.

"They go through their life cycle rapidly, flower quickly, produce vast quantities of seeds, and have some seed adaptations for travel by wind, water or animals," Mason said in a fact sheet.

Soil movement and changes in water content invigorate annual seeds, Peachey said. "Most weed seeds don't live particularly long, a few years perhaps. But there always are a few that can linger."

A dandelion may produce 15,000 seeds per year, purslane more than 52,000, while pigweed can leave behind over 117,000, according to Colorado State University Extension horticulturists. Purslane and pigweed seeds can persist in the soil for 20 and 40 years respectively, they said.

One Arctic plant was successfully germinated after its seeds lay frozen for 32,000 years in the Siberian tundra, said Russian scientists who used radiocarbon dating to validate their claim.

Weed management options are many and varied.

"Hand-weed in small spaces," Pea-

chey said. "Use organic mulches to keep weeds from emerging and producing seeds later. Create stale seed banks by disturbing the soil, using a flaming tool to burn off whatever weeds sprout up, and then do your planting."

It takes two or three weeks for seeds to emerge though, so that scorched-earth policy may delay spring gardening.

"Use specialized hoes," Peachey said. "Triangular hoes or hoop hoes are good at getting the entire weed root out."

Peachey doesn't recommend using chemicals in vegetable gardens unless you're working with more than a tenth of an acre. "Very few (chemicals) that are labeled for garden use are practical," he said.

Be observant. When weeds make seeds, they make them fast.

"It's important to watch weeds through the entire summer season," Peachey said. "If some get by, and if you can't dig them out, then at least cut off their seed heads. It's cheaper to get rid of the seeds than it is to fight the weeds."