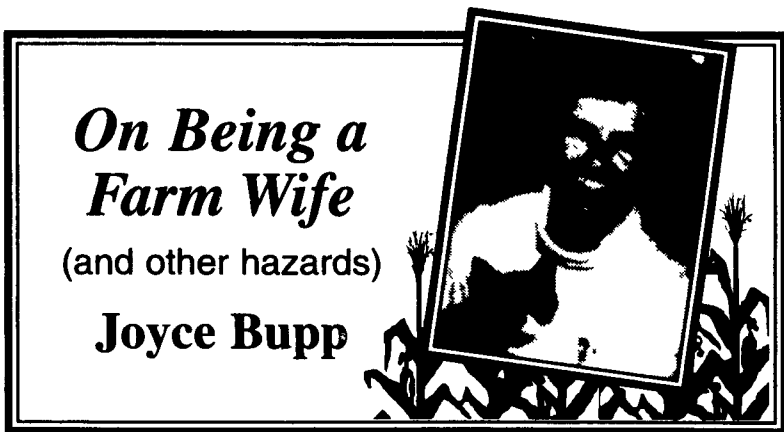


'Pot-In-Pot' Grows Trendy



“Ummm, what do I smell?”
On any given day around here about lunch time, the answer to that query could vary widely.

One recent morning, it was the aroma of beef tenderizing in a slow oven in a sauce of brown gravy, waiting to be flooded into a waiting pond of mashed potatoes. That proved a workable choice on this particular day when I grabbed lunch, headed off on an errand and returned to find the leftovers vanished, with a used dinnerplate and eating utensils in the sink. Sometimes, it might be meatloaf and scalloped potatoes, or baked chicken and baked potatoes. Perhaps a casserole or lasagna or ham or spaghetti sauce or soup simmering on a back burner.

On days with a spare minute, the mid-day atmosphere around the kitchen might hint of a cake in progress, or cookies just about ready to come out of the oven. Late summer finds the kitchen reminiscent of a tomato cannery, as the basement shelves get stocked with our annual needs of canned tomatoes, tomato sauce and salsa. A favorite of chillier weather is the house hung heavy with the fragrance of apple butter cooking down in the oven.

But on this day, the greeting uttered by those entering the house is slightly less enthusiastic.

“Ughh, what is that smell?”
Most folks could probably make lots of guesses, and still come up short the correct answer. And when you finally admit what it is, the answer might generate a blank look.

“Ground. I’m cooking ground.
Or to be more environmentally correct, I’m cooking soil. Potting soil.

The house is full of this pungent, earthy scent because I don’t care to repeat a frustrating short-cut undertaken last year. A pointed note — written by me to myself — that I came across a few days ago issued specific instructions in the capital-letter, computer-style, equivalent of shouting.

“Do not try to start these tomato seeds without sterilizing the soil.”

See, last year, in a time crunch, I didn’t. A day came when realization hit that it was well overdue to start tomato seeds if I was going to have my favorite varieties to plant out in the garden, specifically those not usually

available as started plants. Packs of seed were here, I had just neglected sterilizing starter medium in which to sprout them. So, I used clean containers and commercially-packaged potting soil, which I really thought was sterilized. But I didn’t read the label for that specific criteria.

It was a short-sighted shortcut. Because the seeds sprouted, poked their little heads through the soil surface, and soon after keeled over with damp-off disease. Which is generally preventable simply by sterilizing starter soil a few hours in a slow oven to kill the responsible bacteria. Or, irresponsible bacteria, maybe.

Whatever, I ended up buying tomato plants and restarting a few specialty ones. And they all seemed to take incredibly long to start ripening.

This season, it’s back to the proverbial “Square one,” aiming to repeat the earliest-ripening tomato I’ve ever grown. It’s a plum-type called Enchantment; a thoughtful reader out there sent me some seeds years ago with a recommendation on how early it was. After starting them inside, I plunked two of the little plants into those wall-o-water devices, sort of a mini-“teepee” with water between two layers of plastic which protect the plant from chills, or worse.

Once they got roots established and the sun grew brighter, the plants literally climbed out the top of the plastic shell complete with blooms ready for pollinating. They were the first to ripen, and the last still on the vine months later when frost hit.

Naturally, I was enchanted by the qualities of the Enchantment tomato and ordered more to keep on hand.

So, please excuse the pungent odor temporarily permeating our house.

Our tomato-loving family is hoping it’s the smell of success.

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A relatively new landscape and nursery stock production technique that combines conventional field and container practices is finding a successful niche in the industry.

Pot-in-pot (PIP), the technique of growing container trees and shrubs in a holding pot permanently placed in the ground, is an alternative system to field culture, or growing trees and shrubs directly in the soil. Pot-in-pot is becoming very popular but it has some critical issues that need to be considered.

“Pot-in-pot is an increasing trend in the United States,” said Hannah Mathers, an Ohio State University nursery and landscape specialist. “Container production is getting to be a bigger deal. On the West Coast, container production represents about 45 percent of nursery production. It’s anticipated that container production will continue to grow and eventually pass field production, and pot-in-pot is part of that growth.”

Mathers speculates the growing popularity of pot-in-pot production is due in part to the many advantages the technique offers landscape and nursery professionals over field production.

“For one thing a tree can be sold year-round in container production,” said Mathers. “If you put a tree in the ground, you basically only have two time periods to lift that tree for sale, spring or fall. But with pot-in-pot, you’ve got a lot more flexibility with the material.”

Trees and shrubs raised in pot-in-pot production also tend to grow faster because the soil-less medium used to grow the plants enables professionals to add additional fertilizer and water, something that can’t be done with soils.

“What used to take two years in the field could take only one

year in a container,” said Mathers. “So you can turn more units off that acreage of land, about three times the production versus field culture.”

Pot-in-pot production is also more environmentally friendly than field production because it reduces soil mining, a condition where the topsoil is removed with the root balls in conventional field culture.

Research has shown that soil removal due to ‘mining’ has enormous implications to the economic viability of a field nursery. It is estimated that the harvesting of 44-inch diameter balled-and-burlapped stock can result in the loss of 470 tons of soil per acre. This is an average of 94 tons of soil lost per acre during a 5-year rotation or 2.8 inches of topsoil lost in 5 years.

“Of course pot-in-pot requires relatively permanent modifications to a nursery field that result in soil profile changes,” said Mathers. “But if for some reason you reverted a field from pot-in-pot back to conventional culture, the soil levels would be virtually unchanged.”

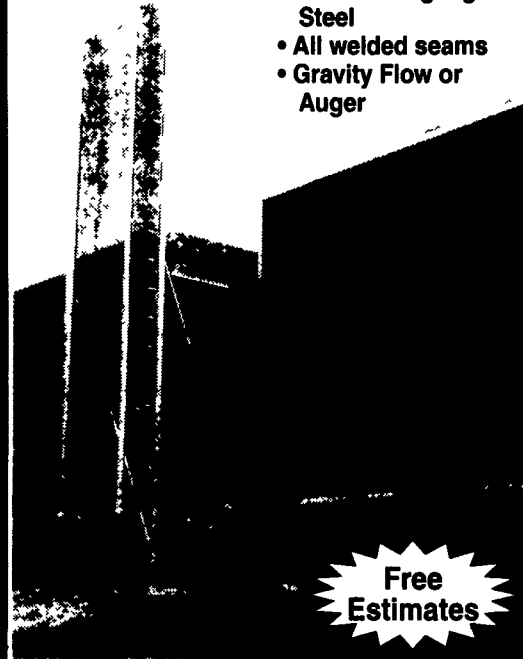
Despite such advantages, however, the biggest drawback in developing a pot-in-pot system is the cost, which can

run \$30,000-\$32,000 an acre. Mathers said drainage and irrigation are the two biggest driving forces behind the high cost. “A drainage line needs to be placed under every row of pots, because whenever you grow a plant in a container, you get what’s called perched water, where a certain amount of water in the container never evaporates,” she said. “So you need the drainage system to eliminate as much of that water as possible.”

Trees and shrubs grown using the pot-in-pot technique may be of higher quality, but Mathers said the market for such quality has to exist for a business to be successful in selling its products.

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