

A close-up photograph of a bromeliad leaf. The leaf is a vibrant green color with prominent, parallel veins. A single, clear water droplet is perched at the tip of the leaf, reflecting light. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the plant's structure.

PLANNINI

Water collects at the base of a Bromeliad – an upright plant with moderate growth. It prefers bright, indirect light and warm temperatures. Do not over water, and mist its leaves regularly.



G AHEAD

NOTES FROM A HIGH-ALTITUDE GARDENER
GETTING READY FOR THE SEASON AHEAD

by TRACI J. MACNAMARA • *photos by* ANTHONY THORNTON

At this time of the year, the parking lot at Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm in Edwards is dusted with snow, just like most gardens in the Vail Valley. But come summer, this place will be blossoming with plant life that's ready to soak up the sun.

Even though gardening might seem like a distant thought for those of us who are still outside shoveling snow, Stacey Jones of the Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm team is busy prepping for a wild burst of activity that's only a few short weeks away. In the meantime, she has a bit of time to share her notes with aspiring high-altitude gardeners, from first-timers to seasoned growers alike.

DON'T BE DETERRED

Gardening at high altitudes isn't issue-free, but it's not as difficult as some might think. The primary challenges stem from a short growing season and a dry climate, coupled with finicky soil and abrupt temperature shifts. Add in the additional headaches caused by marauding critters, such as deer or other garden pests, and you might be throwing down your trowel in frustration before the first week in July.

But if you're insistent on growing a garden at a high altitude, then don't be deterred. There are plenty of reasons to venture forth into such challenging terrain. Growing your own herbs for a flavor punch in homemade meals or muddling fresh mint for a refreshing summer's eve mojito are just a few ways that you'll reap rewards from the effort you put into tending a garden, whether it consists of a few small containers or a plot that's bigger than your bedroom.

"Don't think that gardening is all black and white," says Jones. "Many people have different strategies that work." Which is hopeful for those who like to experiment and try new things, come summer. But for now, it's time to



BELOW: This Barrel cactus of an unknown variety sports flowers on its top. Caring for these cacti is simple by minimally watering it in well-drained soil in a sunny location. RIGHT: Various cacti at Wildflower Farms in Edwards.

plan and dream, time to imagine watching those tender shoots sprout up from the Earth, time to gather the knowledge and inspiration that will make it happen.

START SMALL

If you've never grown a high-altitude garden before, then begin with a realistic goal so that you can have a successful first season. Consider planting either a container garden or a small-sized plot in your yard, and then add in an additional challenge each year.

"If you're tending your first garden, I'd suggest starting with low-maintenance and hardy perennials," says Jones. "Most gardeners aren't successful with vegetables in their first year, and you'll likely encounter more challenges than successes until you gain experience. Instead, include herbs in your perennial garden," she says.

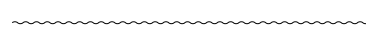
Planting a container garden will likely be more manageable than planting a plot if you're a first-time high-altitude gar-



ABOVE: Start plants from seed now, so that they're ready to go when the weather warms up. RIGHT: This Polka Dot or Splash plant is an upright plant with moderate growth. It is easy to care for with just filtered sunlight, keeping it moderately moist and avoiding any extreme temperatures.



IF YOU'RE TENDING YOUR FIRST GARDEN, I'D SUGGEST STARTING WITH LOW-MAINTENANCE AND HARDY PERENNIALS.



deners. Containers are mobile, and if early- or late-season frost threatens your garden, then you can move them indoors for the night. Containers can also add a fun pop of color to a deck, yard, or walkway. And you can even choose containers with wheeled bases so that you can roll them easily into a protected location.

If you choose to plant from seed, whether you're planting in a container or in a small plot, then choose cool-season seeds with short yield times. Usually these details are written on the on the

seed packet, and local high-altitude gardening gurus, such as the ones at Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm, can also help guide you towards the best choices.

Pre-planned garden kits, such as Garden-In-A-Box from the Boulder-based Center for Resource Conservation, can also help high-altitude gardeners achieve success. With its easy, plant-by-number approach, Garden-In-A-Box includes a selection of plants that grow well together while promoting water-efficient gardening and landscaping, which is

important in high altitude areas.

The Center for ReSource Conservation begins selling its Garden-In-A-Box products each year in the spring and will offer a new Alpine Meadows Garden this year, designed specifically for high-altitude areas. If you're new to gardening, you might appreciate this user-friendly approach that comes with a plant map and instructions for each plant species, including watering information and other good-to-know details about what pollinators it will likely attract.

Seed packets purchased from garden retailers such as Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm also often include information about plant care, and the garden staff there will be willing to advise you in designing the layout of your plot when you're ready to move from starting small to going big, and even bigger, with your garden.

GARDEN-IN-A-BOX: The Plant-By-Number Garden Kit

If you like the idea of having your garden already mapped out, seeded, and ready to plant in the ground come June, then check out Garden-In-A-Box. The new Alpine Meadows Garden kit will:

- Contain design layout and instructions for a 100-square-foot plot.
- Include 29 multi-colored flowering perennials, hardy up to 10,000 feet.
- Bloom in the summer and fall, year after year.
- Likely attract hummingbirds, butterflies, and bees.
- Simplify your water-wise gardening experience.

Order your Garden-In-A-Box online in early March from the Boulder-based Center for ReSource Conservation. Garden kit pick-ups are normally available in late May at a variety of Front Range locations, but Garden-In-A-Box Program Coordinator Rachael Jaffe is open to the possibility of planning a mid-June Vail Valley delivery, depending on interest. Call her directly for more details, and "like" Garden-in-A-Box on Facebook for gardening tips and updates.

Rachael Jaffe, Garden Program Coordinator
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Garden-In-A-Box Online Store
www.GardenInABoxCO.org
www.facebook.com/GardenInABoxCO

CHOOSE A CHALLENGE

If you're imagining a simmering pot of puttanesca sauce on your stove, chock full of chunky homegrown tomatoes, then maybe it's time to try growing a few more challenging plants or construct ways to extend the growing season with a cold frame or even a small greenhouse.

Tomatoes have longer yield times than other quick-growing cool-season plants, such as many types of greens, and they can also be sensitive to soil conditions and bugs. Tomatoes, like other plants that prefer warmer growing seasons, will often need to be seeded indoors and then planted outside as pretty large, healthy plants so that they're more resistant to environmental factors. They also need more upkeep, including pruning, and daily, eagle-eye attention.

"Get a magnifying glass if you're growing vegetables," says Jones. "Experience with high-altitude gardening will contribute to greater success, but you also need to be very in tune with your plants." If you notice any signs of yellowing or spotting leaves, bugs, mushy roots, or spotty stems, then you'll need to address the problem quickly to avoid having it destroy your crop.

If you have modest DIY inclinations, then consider building a cold frame to help protect temperature-sensitive plants and keep them safe from garden pests. Like a mini-greenhouse, a cold frame can also help keep moisture in the soil and humidity in the air to create more ideal growing conditions for plants that are difficult to

grow in high-altitude conditions.

Other more advanced high-altitude gardening strategies include building a greenhouse and installing irrigation systems. Growing vegetables such as peppers, eggplant and squash could all be challenging to grow in this climate because they prefer warmer weather and moisture-rich soil. So if you're dreaming up a dish of homegrown eggplant parmesan following your puttanesca sauce success, then get out your work gloves for some high-altitude garden engineering.

Of course, if you choose to embrace a new challenge with your garden this summer, you won't be alone. The folks at Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm are experienced and friendly; plus, they've got a wide selection of

books and how-to pamphlets that will arm you with the advice you'll need this spring as you begin planning your garden.

In the past few years, community garden interest has also blossomed, so seek advice from your neighbors and friends who are making use of community garden plots in Vail, Minturn, Eagle-Vail, Eagle, and Avon.

Finally, even if you fail in the process, you'll likely walk away from your high-altitude gardening attempt with more than dirty hands. You'll gain a greater appreciation for what it takes to grow flowers and food. You'll learn more about the landscape you love. And maybe you'll succeed in growing a single sprig of mint that you can use to garnish a cocktail this summer. **WR**



The Halfpint Design pot hanger, made with macrame beads and rope, comes in a variety of colors at Wildflower Farms.