

Backstage *in the* Garden



Do you have more plants than you know what to do with right now? Create a holding bed—a temporary nursery—to care for them until you can place them in the garden. BY LINDA ASKEY

PRONE TO spontaneous plant purchases, as well as being a compulsive plant propagator, I have had a holding bed as long as I have gardened. A place to park everything I couldn't live without yet had no immediate time or space to set in the garden, it was my guilty secret.

My first clue that I wasn't alone was in an early catalog from Heronswood Nursery, the connoisseur's mailorder nursery during its heyday in the 1990s and early aughts. In one, nurseryman and author Dan Hinkley referred to his holding bed as his "procrastination garden." Suddenly I realized the cluster of pots near the driveway had a name—and not a diagnosis.

Many years later, my holding bed is still in the spot where I nurture hopes for my future garden, where I keep new perennials, shrubs, and trees that need to wait for summer's heat and drought to pass before being moved to their permanent home. There too are the disappointments—the plants that have not thrived or those that didn't work in my garden's scheme. There are also the extras—plants grown from divisions or ones uprooted while weeding that I couldn't throw away. Occasionally I find a place for them in the garden; more often they are given to visitors. And I must confess that I sometimes keep plants in my holding bed much longer than I should, so it really is a procrastination garden.

It turns out I have a lot of kindred spirits. Earlier this year, *The American Gardener* asked you about your holding beds, and you responded! Your answers reveal that each holding bed is as individual as the owner.

LOCATION, LOCATION

Regardless of the reason for having a holding bed, it must be properly located. **Susan Shepard** (Jackson, Tennessee) found an ideal spot for hers that faces east behind a garden shed. She says, "That gives it protection from west winds and storms. It receives morning sun. Also, it's close to a rain barrel so watering is easy." Morning sun is the almost magical orien-



Holding beds can take many forms. Above: Leftover perennials from a fundraising sale at the Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church in Dryden, Michigan, are planted in a bed by the playground to be dug up for sale the following year. Left: An unused part of a driveway is a temporary stop for this group of potted plants in an Oregon garden.

tation where both sun- and shade-loving plants get enough of what they need to be happy.

Her holding area is clearly defined. “I used an eight-foot by four-foot by 11-inch raised bed frame, lined the bottom with landscape cloth, and filled it two-thirds full with sand,” she explains. “I bury potted plants in the sand. They don’t dry out as quickly that way.” The sand also insulates the pots from cold in the winter, and the pots are less likely to be tipped over by wind. The landscape fabric slows the growth of roots that naturally seek to grow outside of the pots.

NURSERIES FOR GOOD CAUSES

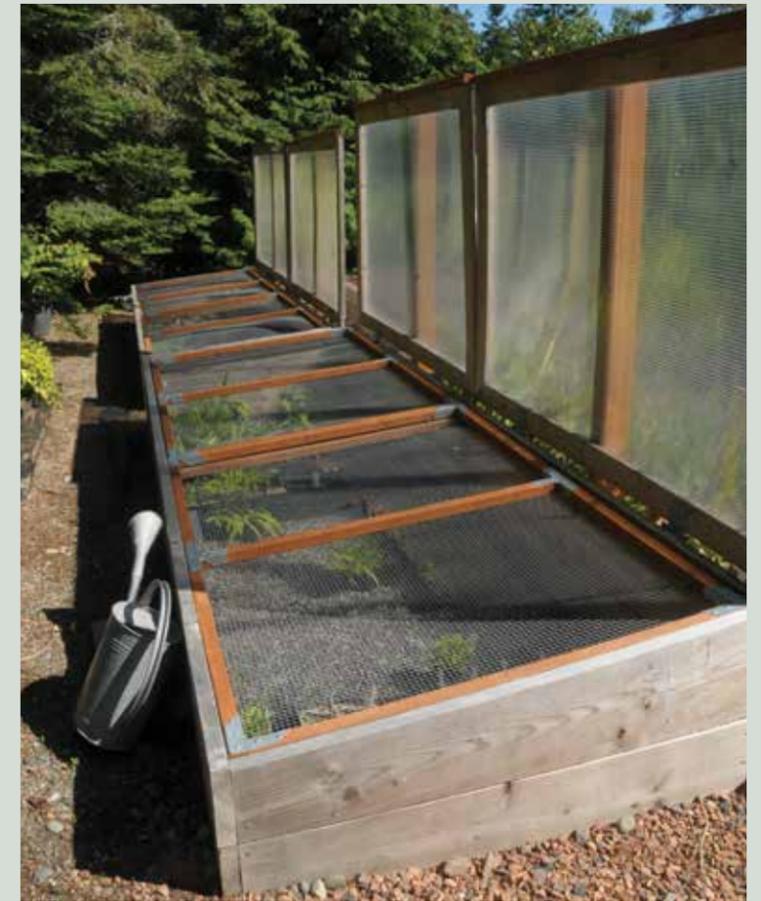
Donna Shirer Cochrac (Brecksville, Ohio) faced an unenviable situation last year. She writes, “When contractors were ripping up my yard to make connections to a new sanitary sewer, I needed a place to hold shrubs and perennials until my gardens could be restored. I used a section of my vegetable garden for this.” In the process, Cochrac realized she had



ESSENTIALS IN A HOLDING BED

Because holding beds are work areas, they are usually not picturesque, but they do need planning to be most functional. Here are some key considerations:

- Appropriate light exposure (sun or shade) is critical. If you don’t have room for both a sun and a shade bed, look for a spot that has both, or bright shade at the very least. It can be surprisingly effective to use taller plants to shade smaller ones, and set newly divided plants on the north side of a taller plant to shelter them temporarily from hot afternoon sun.
- Having a spigot nearby makes watering easier, especially if your plants are in containers. Container plants may need to be watered more than once during the day, especially in a sunny spot in the summer. If this isn’t feasible, find an area in your garden where you can put the plants temporarily in the ground so they can take advantage of soil moisture.
- Locate the bed where there is protection from prevailing winds to prevent plants from drying in summer, freezing in winter, and blowing over anytime. Clustering pots together in winter will help insulate the plants from temperature extremes, as does mounding loose soil, sawdust, bark mulch, pine needles, or piles of shredded leaves around pots and root balls. Jason Reeves says, “A few times I’ve sunk the whole plant in the pot in a hole in the ground for the winter.”
- If you are an enthusiastic propagator and have the space, a cold frame is a great addition to a holding bed, making it easier to grow plants from seeds, as well as divisions and cuttings. —L.A.



Nurseryman Dan Hinkley maintains a series of cold frames as holding areas for plants at Windcliff, his garden in Indianola, Washington.

too much shade to properly grow most vegetables, so now most of her vegetable garden serves as a holding bed. “I am going to start transplanting divisions of my own perennials,” she says, “so I can have large, well-rooted plants to dig up and sell at our Cuyahoga County Master Gardeners annual Plants in the Park sale next spring.”

Master Gardeners think alike. **Candice Meyer** and **Mary Robinson** (Dryden, Michigan) maintain a holding bed at the Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church garden, where they are longtime volunteers. Proceeds from a perennial and bake sale each spring help fund the garden’s development and maintenance. Meyer recalls, “Because we didn’t want to discard the leftover perennials, we created a bed along the fence that encloses the children’s playground and began planting selected ones

there. This not only enhanced the playground and back of the church, but we now have plants that we can dig up or divide for our sale.”

Joan Lindquist (Bridgeport, Connecticut) has kept as many as 500 plants for her garden club in her garden. Divisions from member gardens are taken when the first perennial shoots emerge, and then they are grown in Lindquist’s holding beds for the garden club plant sale in May. “Some of the holding areas are the raised beds we use for our vegetables,” she says. “Others are between raised beds. Still others are under or between bushes where the plants will get proper light.”

TO EACH ITS SEASON

Winter container plants are chosen most often for their hardiness. Whether evergreen, winter flowering, or both, they

are seldom the showiest choices for summer. During the warm months, **Jason Reeves** (Clarksburg, Tennessee) maintains a grouping of ceramic containers at the end of his driveway filled with bright mixtures of annuals and tropicals. About mid-November, he removes these plants, stores the ceramic pots, and turns to his holding bed for replacements. “I have four large plastic pots that are planted for winter,” he says. “They spend the summer at the sunny end of my holding area.” These pots feature evergreen trees such as ‘Araucarioides’ Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) and a curly Harry Lauder’s walking stick (*Corylus avellana* ‘Contorta’), a deciduous shrub with eye-catching twisted branches. In early June, Reeves moves the trees back to the holding area so he can once again create new, colorful displays for summer.

TOP: COURTESY OF CANDICE MEYER; BOTTOM: MICHAEL S. THOMPSON

GRACE HENSLEY

ROOM TO GROW

Sometimes new plants can't compete successfully with established plants. As a garden designer and blogger, **Claire Jones** (Sparks, Maryland) regularly receives samples of new plants for testing. She says, "They are usually quite small, and I don't want them to be overwhelmed in my gardens." So she plants them in a small, sunny holding bed near her vegetable garden. "Once they grow in a little bit, I have a better idea of how they will perform and can select the perfect location on my property to transplant them."

Martha Sykora (Annapolis, Maryland) uses her holding bed the same way for small saplings. She lets them grow for a couple of years before she sets them among established plants in her garden. In addition to height, the young trees will develop a bigger root system that increases their chance of survival.

FACILITATING A MOVE

Ginger Turk (Midway, Arkansas) moved from Illinois three years ago, and during the months traveling between two homes, she gradually relocated plants from her former garden to raised holding beds in the new garden. She says, "There are five raised beds that get shaded from the intense afternoon sun by two huge oaks, and the plants love it here! It's so nice to go out to my instant 'nursery' for stock whenever needed. Also, if a plant isn't thriving in a spot, I'll move it back to the nursery for rejuvenation, and then re-think the location. Today I can't imagine being without the convenience of a holding bed."

Sherran Blair (St. Petersburg, Florida) and Martha Sykora also found their holding beds invaluable when they relocated. Blair made a big jump from USDA Zone 6a in Ohio to Zone 10b in Florida, so her holding

bed allows her an opportunity to observe the habit and performance of new plants and visualize effective combinations before moving them to the garden. Although Sykora only moved a short distance to her current home, her holding bed was more than a temporary space for the plants from her former garden. It was meaningful she says "to preserve the memories of the occasions when some of the plants were added to the gardens at our previous house."

GROWING, NOT HOLDING

For some gardeners, holding beds serve as mini gardens with specific functions. Master Gardener **Gayle Chatfield** (near Lake Superior, Wisconsin) writes, "I have large raised 'holding beds' for holding plants, seeding perennials and shrubs, propagation, and to use as cutting gardens." Chatfield has beds in both shade and part sun. Raised beds allow her to plant intensively.



These beds in Ginger Turk's garden in Midway, Arkansas, were originally created to hold plants being moved from her former home.



"I currently have small *Syringa yunnanensis* plants grown from cuttings from a friend's shrub, and seedling *Viburnum trilobum* shrubs from a particularly nice specimen in the wild," she says. "I also propagate unusual trilliums and native wildflowers and give them away."

"I call such beds my nursery beds," says **Linda Trapkin** (Syracuse, New York). "I plant my tulips (used as annuals for cutting), divisions from my main beds that I don't yet have the courage to compost (such as daylilies), and divisions (Siberian irises) to use in bouquets. Essentially I am making an auxiliary cutting garden."

TO PLANT OR TO POT

Gardeners are divided between those who plant in the soil of their holding beds and those who hold their plants in pots. **Mark Miller** (Columbus, Ohio) says, "I never plant things in the ground that I know I will have to transplant later." He has a small holding bed in filtered shade in his backyard mainly for newly purchased plants "destined for my mother's garden the next time I see her. I leave



Top: Gayle Chatfield, shown with her dog, Chesapeake, constructed large raised beds to serve as holding areas. Above: In this bed, Chatfield is propagating Japanese primrose (*Primula japonica*), 'Golden Tiara' hosta, pink turtlehead (*Chelone lyonii*), and Celandine poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*).

the plants in their pots and cover them with mulch."

Linda Leduc (Belchertown, Massachusetts) also keeps her plants potted. "I put each plant in its own pot, add-

ing good composted soil and bone meal first," she says. "Some stay in pots only a few weeks, but others I've had in their pots for a year or more." To keep plants through the winter, she moves them to a sheltered location near a shed. Fallen leaves can be raked between and over the pots to provide insulation from the cold.

On the other hand, it is easier to maintain plants that are rooted in soil and can tap a greater supply of moisture and nutrients, such as the holding bed/border at the Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church. It all depends on what works best for you.

Finally, I echo the sentiments of **Lisa Oliver** (Grayling, Michigan). She writes, "My holding gardens have become a necessity due to my passion for wanting to add new plants to the garden, prior to having a plan."

Thank heaven for holding beds! ☺

Linda Askey is a horticulturist who writes from her experiences in her Birmingham, Alabama, garden, where she has two holding beds of potted plants, one for shade and one for sun.