

## Cyber crops

# Computers come to the aid of gardeners

NEW YORK (AP) — Here's the latest dirt for gardening enthusiasts.

There's a growing line of personal computer software that promises to help everyone from the most experienced hobbyist to the novice who's all thumbs, none of which happen to be green.

They can tell you when to start planting grass seed (early spring for many regions); which perennials can withstand harsh winters (the daffodil is one of several); and what plants don't mind neglect (try peppermint and periwinkles).

A few programs can redesign your entire back yard, while at least one can show what your garden, trees and bushes will look like several years down the road.

Professionals have been mapping out gardens and landscape designs via computer for years, but it wasn't until recently that such programs became widely available for the consumer.

Lately they've been sprouting like, well, weeds.

### On the grow

In 1993, there were little more than a

handful of gardening programs with sales totaling \$2.2 million; the next year there were 20 with triple the sales, according to PC Data, a Reston, Va., software tracking firm.

Sales are expected to move even higher this year as more products are introduced, making gardening software among the fastest growing in the line of personal productivity programs, a sector that includes high-tech how-to guides for things like cooking and home improvement.

There's little wonder why they've taken root — Americans simply love to grow things.

About 72 million households engaged in at least one gardening activity in 1994 and spent \$25.9 billion on supplies, up from the 70 million households that spent \$16.3 billion in 1989, the National Gardening Association in Burlington, Vt. said. Furthermore, at least 26 million people do some or all of their own landscaping each year, according to the association.

"We're seeing that certain kind of pride of place... I like to call it outside decorating," said Bruce Butter-

field, the group's research director.

At the same time, more individuals — about a third of all U.S. households right now — own PCs and are finding more uses for the high-powered machines.

### Computer help

"Obviously, a person wouldn't buy a computer in order to plan his or her garden. But they (the programs) can help you get more organized and give you a pretty wide range of information fast," said Michael MacCahey, editor in chief of National Gardening magazine.

PC gardeners can become better informed about available products and services and even save money by learning how to do some or all of the work themselves. (A well landscaped home can increase the resale value of a home by between 4 and 5 percent, according to a Clemson University study published last year.)

The current crop of gardening software, many in the \$50 to \$70 price range, falls into two basic categories — plant databases and landscape design. A few overlap.

The plant database programs include products such as: Better Homes and Gardens Complete Guide to Gardening; The Exotic Garden; Florafile; and Garden Encyclopedia.

Each serves as a giant resource of information on hundreds of plants, trees, flowers, vegetables and herbs, including planting and caring instructions and common pests and diseases to watch out for. Nearly all show colorful photographs of each plant on file. Some allow users to keep an inventory of plants in their own gardens.

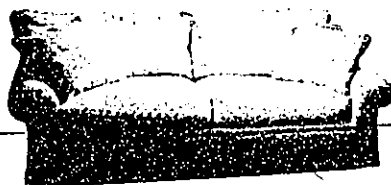
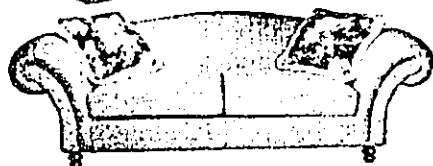
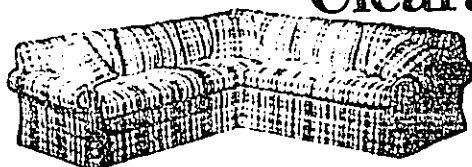
Users can search for plants and flowers by their common or botanical names. (A hemerocallis by any other name is still a Daylily.)

Because of the abundant material many database programs are available only on CD-ROM.

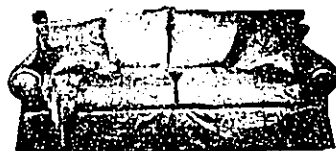
Among the best feature of these programs is the ability to search for plants based on their particular attributes and an individual gardener's needs and regional growing zones. (There are essentially 10 cold hardiness zones in North

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