

# Virtual Gardening *in the* Blogosphere

Garden blogs have sprung up like weeds over the last few years—here's what you need to know to tune in to and participate in this worldwide online community. **BY DOUG GREEN**



LET'S JUMP right in with the important questions: What's a "blog" and why should you care? The simple answer is that a blog is an online diary or journal, but more than that, blogs are the key to an entire world of garden-sharing with other gardeners. You might be interested in seeing pictures of other people's gardens or reading about their successes and failures. You might be interested in learning about your favorite garden writer's gardening techniques on a regular basis rather than whenever an article is published. You might even like to write about and share photographs of your own garden. Blogs make all of this possible, and even easy.

For those who have ventured into online garden forums as a means to communicate with others who share similar interests in the virtual world, you'll note

some key differences between them and blogs. A forum tends to focus on a single issue; for example, you're in the perennials forum and you're talking about problems with perennials. You visit the water garden forum to discuss water garden issues. In contrast, on a blog, a passionate gardener writes about his or her personal garden, describing what's working, what's not, what's in bloom, what's dead or thriving. You may see mentions of kids, partners, local and national issues, and just about anything that the blogger cares to comment on. You may also see garden blogs with multiple authors, or those that are written by professional horticulturists or writers as a commercial venture.

Blogs share pictures; most forums don't. Blogs are opinionated by nature while garden forums try to avoid controversy. Blogs deliver their content im-

mediately and right to your desktop. Forums demand that you visit and click on links to search around for what you want to talk about. Blogs are about creating a relationship by having direct conversations between readers and the author while forums tend to be more impersonal.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Susan Harris, one of four bloggers on GardenRant ([www.gardenrant.com](http://www.gardenrant.com)), says that blogging is "like a conversation" and you can learn something from every exchange. And you'll soon see that there is nothing like reading blogs to understand how different gardeners see the world and to give you a framework for your own gardening efforts. We're not alone out there in this big garden and there are others going through sim-



**Top left:** Contributors to Gardenrant include (clockwise from top left) Elizabeth Licata, Michele Owens, Amy Stewart, and Susan Harris. **Top right:** Hanna Rhoades blogs on This Garden is Illegal.



ilar experiences. For example, readers of my own blog ([www.douggreensgarden.com](http://www.douggreensgarden.com)) love to hear that I have problems—that my garden has bugs and weeds and other challenges they can relate to.

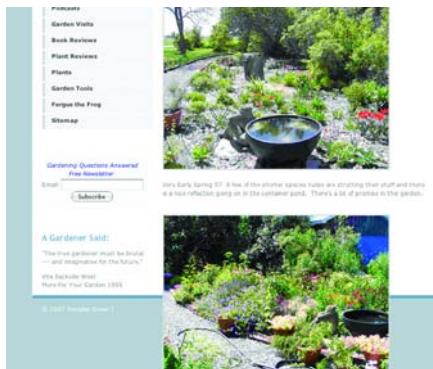
Carol Michel from May Dreams Gardens ([www.maydreamsgardens.blogspot.com](http://www.maydreamsgardens.blogspot.com)) says that “you won’t ever meet as many passionate gardeners in real life as you can in the virtual world of the web.” Kathy Purdy of Cold Climate Gardening ([www.coldclimategardening.com](http://www.coldclimategardening.com)) agrees, saying that reading blogs is like “being part of an international gardening club.”

Indeed, many garden bloggers get started in an effort to find kindred spirits when ones in everyday life are lacking. And in the case of Hanna Rhoades—who started her blog, This Garden is Illegal ([www.thisgardenisillegal.com](http://www.thisgardenisillegal.com)), in hopes of

meeting other Generation X gardeners—she discovered that kindred spirits came in all age ranges. If you’re curious about how and why some of the earliest garden bloggers got their start, Purdy chronicled this development in a fascinating series of articles and interviews at [www.coldclimategardening.com/garden-blog-pioneers](http://www.coldclimategardening.com/garden-blog-pioneers).

### NAVIGATING THE GARDEN BLOGOSPHERE

To get started, you can go to any of the most popular blogs listed in the box on the right, many of which include a list of other garden blogs. You can also go to one of the largest directories of garden blogs, Garden Voices, at <http://voices.gardenweb.com>. On



**The author, right, often shares photos of his own garden on his blog, above.**

## Top Garden Blogs

Here are a few garden blogs that are highly rated by Technorati, a blog search engine.

**Cold Climate Gardening,**  
[www.coldclimategardening.com](http://www.coldclimategardening.com)

**Doug Green's Garden,**  
[www.douggreensgarden.com](http://www.douggreensgarden.com)

**Gardening Tips 'n' Ideas,**  
[www.gardeningtipsnideas.com](http://www.gardeningtipsnideas.com)

**GardenRant,** [www.gardenrant.com](http://www.gardenrant.com)

**May Dreams Gardens,** <http://maydreamsgardens.blogspot.com>

**This Garden Is Illegal,**  
[www.thisgardenisillegal.com](http://www.thisgardenisillegal.com)

**You Grow Girl,** [www.yougrowgirl.com](http://www.yougrowgirl.com)

## Resources

### Free blog software

- [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)
- [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)
- [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)

### Free feed readers

- [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) (your account has an RSS reader)
- [www.google.com/reader](http://www.google.com/reader)
- [www.feedreader.com](http://www.feedreader.com)
- [www.bloglines.com](http://www.bloglines.com)

the right hand side of the screen, you’ll see a list of hundreds of garden blogs. Click on the links and you’ll be whisked away to visit another gardener.


On any of these blogs, you’ll see that individual articles are dated and organized one after another with the most recent post first. This is not surprising considering that “blog” is short for “web log,” and indeed, many people use them as an online diary of their opinions and experiences.

If you decide you want to read a particular blogger’s posts on a regular basis, a blog’s Really Simple Syndication (RSS) system makes it easy. Rather than having to bookmark the blog like a regular web-



site, you can use an RSS reader or aggregator to easily keep track of numerous blogs. Every time new information is added to a blog you subscribe to through your RSS reader, the reader will automatically find this update and bring it to you.


An RSS reader comes in a variety of forms—a few of the most popular and free ones are listed under “Resources” in the box on the opposite page. I use a Firefox plug-in called “Sage” and other browsers have RSS readers built right into them.

When you see this symbol on a website or blog, it means there’s an RSS feed you can subscribe to.  Some blogs may just have a “Subscribe” link, or allow you to receive notices of new posts by e-mail.

## WORLDWIDE CONVERSATIONS

One of the delights of visiting blogs is being able to comment on what the blogger has written; you’ll see the comments link at the bottom of each post. Click on those links to see what others have said. Don’t be afraid to add your own comment about the post or even the other comments. You’ll wind up in a conversation and find that online friendships bloom quickly—whether you write your own blog or just share comments on others.

This interactivity gives “people a voice in gardening to offset the traditional instructional or more authoritarian writing style” of other garden media, observes Gayla Trail from You Grow Girl ([www.yougrowgirl.com](http://www.yougrowgirl.com)). However, Carol Michel of May Dreams Gardens cautions that, because blogs don’t typically go through editorial processes or fact checking like traditional media, “don’t believe everything you read.” Regardless, Michel says, “you’ll soon realize you aren’t alone in your hyperpassion for plants and gardening.”

This passion for gardening is what is so infectious about every successful blog. No matter how popular the blog or how many subscribers it has, every blog shares what’s important to its writer and readers. And this open-ended exchange of real life, down-in-the-dirt experiences is what garden blogging is all about. 

*Doug Green is an award-winning garden author and experienced nurseryman who lives in Ontario, Canada. He has been blogging since 2005.*

## STARTING YOUR OWN BLOG

While there are professional garden bloggers out there, blogging doesn’t require you to be an expert gardener or a computer geek—you only need to be willing to share the important things that go on in your garden life. For example, Stuart Robinson from Garden Tips ‘n’ Ideas ([www.gardeningtipsnideas.com](http://www.gardeningtipsnideas.com)) says that even though he has not taken gardening courses, he’s an enthusiastic gardener and started blogging just to share his garden and meet people. Now he has a popular garden blog, even writing from faroff southwestern Australia.

You don’t have to understand complicated web design languages or invest any money to start your own blog. Several free—or open source—software programs (listed in the “Resources” box on the opposite page) offer a quick and easy way to get started. Blogger.com only requires three clicks to create a blog, for example.



As Robinson says, “Once you have your own blog, you can decide how easy or complicated you want to make it.” He recommends writing regular posts to keep readers interested and keeping the frequency of your posts consistent, whether it’s daily, weekly, or somewhere in between. He also advises interacting with your readers through the comments section.

Uploading digital photographs helps to make your words come alive. To shrink or crop images as needed, standard photo editing software such as Adobe Photoshop can be helpful, or you can experiment with Gimp (free photo modifying software available at [www.gimp.org](http://www.gimp.org)). And as you



write and publish your blog, you may even find yourself making money with your efforts. This, too, can be easily set up by allowing a few advertisements on your blog.

Once you have mastered the free blogging world, you can move on to your own URL using one of the major software systems, such as [www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com), that give you more flexibility but come with more maintenance problems. However, as Kathy Purdy from Cold Climate Gardening warns, blogging can be so much fun, it takes over your life, so it’s important to decide how much time you want to dedicate to it. And the minute you find yourself getting too serious about it, it’s time to turn off the computer and wander out to the garden.

—D.G.