

## HOMEGARDEN

## Plant Theft: Ripped Off, Roots And All

BY NARA SCHOENBERG  
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CHICAGO — MaryAnne Spinner was standing on the garage-top deck of her Lincoln Park home when she saw two men with shopping carts making their way through the alley below.

At first, she was puzzled: Why were their carts lined with little green plants?

Then she saw one of the men reach up into her neighbor's window box, casually scoop up a pansy plant, roots and all, and deposit it in the cart. A second pansy plant met the same fate.

"Stop!" Spinner yelled. The men just shrugged and picked up their pace, disappearing around a corner with their leafy loot.

"It was so brazen," Spinner says. "It was broad daylight — 2 o'clock in the afternoon. And it was a busy alley; cars come through there all the time."

Ah, spring. We're in that remarkable season when birds sing, sprinklers splash and plants walk.

No one tracks how many flowers, bushes and trees are dug out of the ground each year by fly-by-night landscapers, con artists looking to make a fast buck and home gardeners too lazy or stingy to pony up for their own plants.

But at Chicago-area greenhouses and garden centers, plant people tell of numerous plant theft incidents, some strange (The Pilfered Palm Tree), some silly (The Black Market Petunias) and some just plain sad.

"It's sort of like stealing candy from a baby, or picking on a little old lady or someone who's disabled," Spinner says of plant pilfering.

"Steal hubcaps (if you have to), you know? But leave flowers alone."

Familiar flowers such as red geraniums are popular targets, as are annuals in full flower and pricey ornamental grasses and Canna lilies. But thieves have also been known to steal grass (in the form of newly planted sod) right off the ground and uproot entire trees.

Connie Rivera, owner of City Escape garden center, says she was hired by a dentist near Chicago's Ukrainian Village to fill the planters outside his office. Thieves struck the first night, taking bulbs, and continued their raids until the dentist gave up on flowers altogether.

"He said, 'They're too beautiful' to last, Rivera says. "All he did was put in shrubs. There's no color there anymore."

Not all thefts leave a lasting visual legacy, but gardeners call even the smallest strike a blow against civic spirit and natural beauty.

Police departments don't compile statistics on plant thefts, and Adam Schwerner, director of natural resources for Chicago Park District, says that raids on city parks are uncommon.



MaryAnne Spinner poses for a portrait in the backyard of her Lincoln Park apartment, May 1, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. Spinner was standing on the garage-top deck of her home when she saw two men use a shopping cart to tote pansies they had taken from a nearby window box.

"There have been some times when we've come up missing with annuals. Sometimes in our summer installations we will miss some palm trees," he says.

"We lost a palm tree probably four years ago in front of Lincoln Park Conservatory — a very nice palm tree, and that was gone. But, in the main, when we take care of things well, people respect it."

Others suspect sporadic but numerous thefts in a wide range of gardens, parks and public places.

"I think it's pretty common," says Rivera, who planted 10,000 tulips on streets bordering her garden center this spring, 100 of which were stolen right out of the ground.

"They didn't even cherry-pick — take one here and one there so we wouldn't see it," she says of the bulb bandits. "They just took (a whole section) out."

Rivera's garden center is in a struggling neighborhood, but she had a similar experience five or six years ago in leafy Lakeview, when a large container of plants was taken from her front porch.

Spinner, a University of Illinois Extension master gardener who lives in one of the priciest sections of the city, says she has experienced about five thefts in the last eight years, including a nearly 3-foot rose of Sharon bush that lasted less than a day.

"We had someone actually climb over our fence once, and we have a wrought-iron gate that

has those really pointy fleur-de-lis things on it that look like swords," she says. "I don't know how they do it."

Despite their tendency to inspire "What have we come to?" diatribes, plant thefts have been a fact of life in American cities for generations, with recent reports spanning the nation and including urban areas and leafy suburbs.

A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article from June 1876 bemoaned a crime wave at a city park: "Rare plants and flowers were ruthlessly dug up from the hot-beds and other places, and the old gardener grew greatly annoyed, and scarcely knew how to catch the thieves," the paper reported. Even after a police stakeout, 10 "splendid geraniums" went missing.

In 1901, Hyde Park was up in arms over bandits who snipped blooms from bushes, and in 1909 six newly planted trees were illegally "wrenched from the soil" near Armour School. "People of the neighborhood are incensed over the latest depredation," the *Daily Tribune* reported.

Today's suspects range from little kids bringing flowers home to Mom to unscrupulous landscapers with pickup trucks and burly crews.

When it comes to small thefts from city parks, Schwerner points the finger at greedy gardeners.

"It's for their yards," he says. "I've been here since 1996, and one or two times we've had sto-

ries of people being found by the police selling plants that have been removed from (city) gardens, but that's very unusual."

Ward Wilson, a landscape architect at Hoy Landscaping in Melrose Park, says other plants fall victim to a slightly more sophisticated brand of criminal. "Some of them get ripped off, and they go to the flea markets, and people resell them. That happened to me," he says.

"I had six 8-inch pots of petunias on my front porch steps for maybe a couple of months and all of a sudden they were just gone one morning. And what I'm told is, you go to the flea markets and see just that kind of thing for sale at 5 bucks a pop — even though I probably paid \$20."

Wilson never recovered his petunias, but he says his company did track down some stolen \$350 leaf blowers.

When it comes to the bigger heists, plant people suspect fly-by-night landscapers, who may be driven to crime by poor planning, shaky finances or a combination of the two.

"They did steal trees," says Christy Webber, owner of Christy Webber Landscapes, of the thieves who struck her project at Kennedy-King College. "They stole, like, four (big) trees. It's got to be a landscaper with a group of people. If people want, they can get enough guys to do just about anything."

Some plants are more popular with thieves than others.

Webber says that thieves working for unethical landscapers love gallon-size ornamental grasses and Canna lilies because they're showy and pricey.

"We have trouble with geraniums," says Schwerner of the Chicago Park District.

"Geraniums tend to be a liked thing, I think because they're familiar."

Flowers, he says, do better when they're planted before they bloom. By the time plants grow flowers and become attractive to thieves, their roots are already deep and they're difficult to remove.

Location matters as well. Thieves generally steer clear of Chicago's iconic tulip display on the Magnificent Mile median, probably because of the constant stream of potential witnesses, both pedestrian and vehicular. They favor areas that are slightly more secluded, or ones that clear out after dark.

And then there's packaging. Thieves have shown marked enthusiasm for the container gardening trend, in which plants are grown in large pots, some of them ceramic or cast iron, all of them relatively portable.

"We have customers that come in and they'll do a beautiful container — and the container walks," says Rivera, who lost her own container in Lakeview to thieves.

"It was huge," she says of the container. "It had to take three

to four guys to move it. It was there for years, and all of a sudden one night it disappeared. Literally up the steps, right at my front door. It could have set my alarm off."

Gardeners say they've seen plants secured with chains and bicycle locks and containers bolted or cemented to the ground.

But perhaps the most common response to flower thieves is the simple act of replanting.

Victims sigh and grumble and complain to their friends. And then they go to work with shovels and seeds.

Rivera, who vows that tulips will rise again in the stripped bed outside her garden center, is a case in point.

"I love the tulips; it's who we are," she says. "I'm not going to stop planting because someone decides to help themselves to a few. I can't do that."

## NOTABLE PLANT HEISTS

In 2006, newly installed security cameras outside the Morris County Courthouse in Morristown, N.J., showed a woman making off with plants on two separate occasions. The 35-year-old suspect was out walking her dog when she allegedly uprooted and absconded with an ornamental grass. On another occasion, surveillance images showed the suspect pulling up a hosta plant.

When Hurricane Frances ripped into Florida's southeastern coast in 2004, thieves broke into the evacuated Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden and stole 32 endangered palmlike cycads with a black market value of \$50,000 to \$70,000.

"Whoever stole those plants knew exactly what they were doing," said Tom Broome, president of the Cycad Society and owner of the Cycad Jungle, a nursery in Polk City, Fla., "because there's a lot of plants around there they could have stolen."

In 2000 and 2001, thousands of dollars worth of indoor plants went missing from Minneapolis office buildings, according to the *Star Tribune* newspaper. Armed with large plastic bags and wire cutters, the suspects hit lobbies and skyways, making off with a snake plant, a Chinese evergreen, bromeliads and marble pothos. The *Star Tribune* reported that one suspect fled the scene, trailing moss and bark.

In 1999, *The Washington Post* reported multiple flower thefts from a single block in the embassy-studded Dupont Circle neighborhood. Residents were robbed of their begonias and then robbed again, with some losing \$300 in flowers between March and October. Police examined a videotape of a heist and held a two-week stakeout on the block, using plants donated by a sympathetic florist, but to no avail.

## WEED PATCH:

## Crofton Garden Party To Be June 19

BY LINDA WUEBBEN

We have been getting wonderful rains over here in northeast Nebraska in the past couple weeks. The welcome moisture has perked up the dwellers, as well as all the crops and gardens. And we have not had to deal with hail — yet.

My garden is finally looking like it has a future. I can't really call it my garden anymore because my hubby has really taken an interest in it since I have many irons in the fire this year. He's my tiller-man because sometimes that beast of a machine wears me out.

The day lilies are breaking out in full force, with early summer blooms filling landscaping areas. When the heat finally hits, even the best of floral designs droop and look frazzled.

My garden is interspersed with flowers, like always. I got a late start on planting, but glad bulbs are popping up straight and tall. I can't wait for their blooms to fill a vase on my dining table.

At each of the first six rows, I



Linda Wuebben

tried some different varieties of sunflowers. These seeds are in shades of red, and maybe some orange. They will not tower as high as the yellow sunflowers that grew in my garden last year when the seed blew out of my bird feeder.

Hopefully by the first weekend of September, they may decorate a wedding party.

I actually have an ulterior motive for the tall flowers. I am planning the rehearsal party for my son's wedding here in our home. So, just in case my garden is not weeded completely from end to end, this small barricade will provide a pleasant view instead of weeds.

I finally put my foot down last week and told myself I had enough potted flowers. With three pots on the front deck and seven out the

patio door, watering them is like running a race. Sometimes I forget the daily routine and then I'm panicked for fear they are dying. When I had picked up a few extra plants the last week of May and found I needed to buy a couple more pots, I knew that was enough.

With the flowering bed in front of my house, under my front deck, around the east side and along the north deck, I have enough to do. My husband does not go there. Those areas are all my own and about mid-July, I'm wondering just how far over the bend I have gone. You know, being crazy about flowers.

I come by it naturally. I remember many days my mom puttering in her flowers around the house while dad checked out how the garden was growing or mowed the lawn. It must be in my blood.

So before the dog days of July hit the area, it is time for a garden party. The Crofton Senior Center is

planning their annual Lawn & Garden Party for Saturday, June 19. The Crofton seniors still have a few tricks up their sleeve.

Of course, like other years, the details can't be revealed about the spectacular gardens and lawns on display this year but a little birdie has given me a small heads-up and I can safely say, you won't be disappointed. As always, the colorful fundraiser is one of the main money-makers for the Crofton Senior Citizens Center. Its members are very grateful for those gardeners who willingly invite flower lovers from the area to view their hard work and success in maintaining very lovely and pleasing vistas around their home.

So, take a morning off, help a local non-profit bring in some cash and along the way, you may garner some good gardening tips you never thought of. It's all about sharing thoughts and ideas about projects loved by many.

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