

Ready, Set, Sow!

Starting marigold and tomato seeds in paper cups on the classroom windowsill is a rite of springtime passage for most school kids, and some of us never outgrow it. Germinating seeds is the buzz among the Master Gardeners currently,



David Chinery

Green thoughts

and techniques, timing and tricks are debated with all the seriousness of a polar expedition planning committee. Each has his/her methods, but the seeds place the same demands on us all.

Where to start seeds is often the first challenge. Windowsills can accommodate only a modest effort, and they can be drafty to boot. Many gardeners rig up fluorescent shop lights, which offer good illumination and are cheap to buy and operate. When growing under lights became popular in the 1970s, fluorescent tube selection was hotly debated, but nowadays gardeners are less fussy, and the plants do well

regardless. Where to set up grow lights often involves family negotiations. The living room, the kitchen table, on top of the washing machine and any number of other places may be best, and the good humor of the household's non-gardeners is greatly appreciated. While out of the way, basements may be too cool.

One Master Gardener's solution is a special closet, with shelves and lights, painted reflective white. With the door closed enough warmth is generated to make a nice seed-starting environment. Grow lights must be kept very close (mere inches) from the tops of tiny seedlings to prevent them from stretching and becoming weak and worthless. Turning on a gentle fan jiggles the seedlings, strengthening them, and the air circulation also reduces disease potential.

Virtually everyone agrees that soil-less potting medium is worth the investment. A host of plant diseases are unleashed when garden soil is brought into a warm indoor environment, and soil which is well drained outside is poorly drained in a pot. Medium formulated for seed starting often contains finely ground peat moss and vermiculite, is lightweight, easy to work with, and contains no disease organisms.

Money can be saved on containers. Discarded items often do well: try using yogurt cups, fast food salad containers and TV dinner trays. Drainage is key, however, so punch a few holes in the bottom. One Master Gardener swears by her soil blocker, a device which forms tight blocks of medium and eliminates the need for a container of any type. The blocks are placed side-by-side in a flat and, while care is needed in watering, the simplicity of this method is attractive.

For those with bigger budgets, all manner of special seed-starting trays, flats, and cells are available. These can be reused year to year if disinfected in a solution of one part bleach to 9 parts water for 15 to 20 minutes.

Using dirty equipment can quickly lead to every seedling's nightmare, a disease called damping off, which causes young plants to keel over, cut off at the knees and die.

Next time I'll discuss the ultimate in seed starting: a home greenhouse.

David Chinery is an educator with The Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County.

ON THE COVER

Urban Landscape

Historic Albany Foundation keeping watch over city's historic fabric, seeing that it doesn't fray beyond repair

By Siobhan Connally
The Record

When Erin Tobin Bearden gets a phone call from a homeowner wanting to donate old wooden windows to her cause — the Historic Albany Foundation and its 10,000 square-foot warehouse of reclaimed parts — she tries her best to get them to reconsider, even though she knows how difficult it is to keep the warehouse stocked with savory salvage.

"I encourage people, especially if they haven't removed them yet, to reuse items that would otherwise end up in landfills," she says, explaining that although she wasn't able to convince a recent caller to reconsider replacing his home's original windows, she was able to get him to store them in the attic in the hope a future property owner might one day restore them.

"As long as they remain with the building, it has a better chance," says Bearden. "That's one of the reasons we don't sell things online. We want Albany's historic resources to stay in the region."

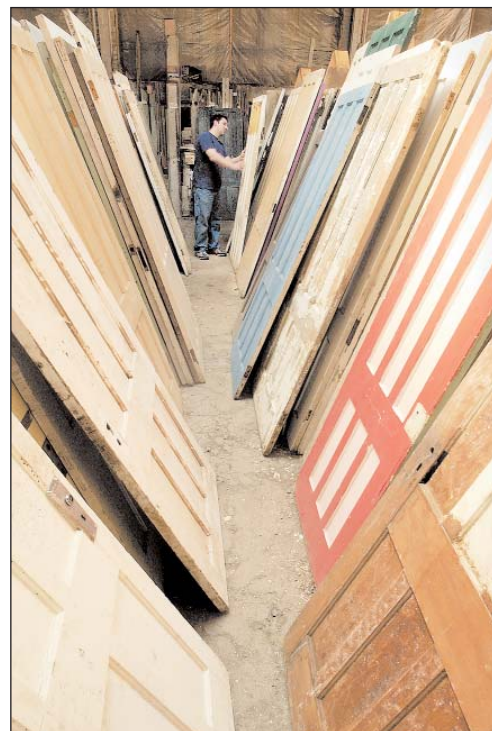
As director of technical services, Bearden oversees grants and outreach for the 650-member organization, which is dedicated to the preservation and appreciation of architectural Albany.

"People think it's easier and cheaper to tear down an old building than to build a new one, but it's not, really. There is also a strong environmental argument to be made for renovation: you are not paying demolition or landfill costs, you are not paying for new construction materials that have chemicals and other toxins and you are using materials that have a longer life span. The investment is better in the long term," says Bearden.

The Architectural Parts Warehouse is one of a host of programs the foundation has spearheaded since its 1974 inception and is what architect and Board President James Cohen calls a loss-leader — a barely self-sustaining initiative that gets people in the door and, he hopes, into memberships and activism.

According to Cohen, while most people know it as a warehouse for antique fixtures, doors and do-dads, the Historic Albany Foundation was formed as a direct response to the demolition of 10 square blocks in downtown Albany for the sprawling Empire State Plaza complex.

"I think people responded to that as a missed opportunity," says Cohen. "There were urban spaces available to accommodate putting the government back into the downtown, which was the goal. Unfortunately, they wanted to get



Rows of doors line several aisles in the Historic Albany Foundation's Parts Warehouse on Lexington Avenue in Albany.

it done by making a grand architectural statement. Now it has a long history, and its criticism melted away."

Today, Historic Albany seeks to educate and advocate for proper urban planning at both the government and grassroots levels.

"Our three missions are advocacy, education and technical assistance for the preservation of historic properties," says Bearden, explaining that the foundation has also acted as a kind of humane society for historic structures in need of a good home. It has acted as a transitional owner, doing emergency structural repairs and maintenance, until a willing developer can take possession and make the proper restorations.

"We don't want to be in the real estate business, but we have taken ownership of buildings as a last resort," explains Cohen, adding that its most extensive project to date is the rehabilitation of St. Joseph's Church in the Ten Broek Avenue neighborhood.

The organization has obtained a \$300,000 challenge grant from state department of Parks, Recreation and historic preservation to stabilize the property, which Historic Albany Foundation must match by raising monetary and in-kind donations.

The organization has already undertaken

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some emergency repairs to shore up the structure and is currently working toward repairs intended to make the structure watertight. The final phase will be to find the right developer to take the next step — restoration.

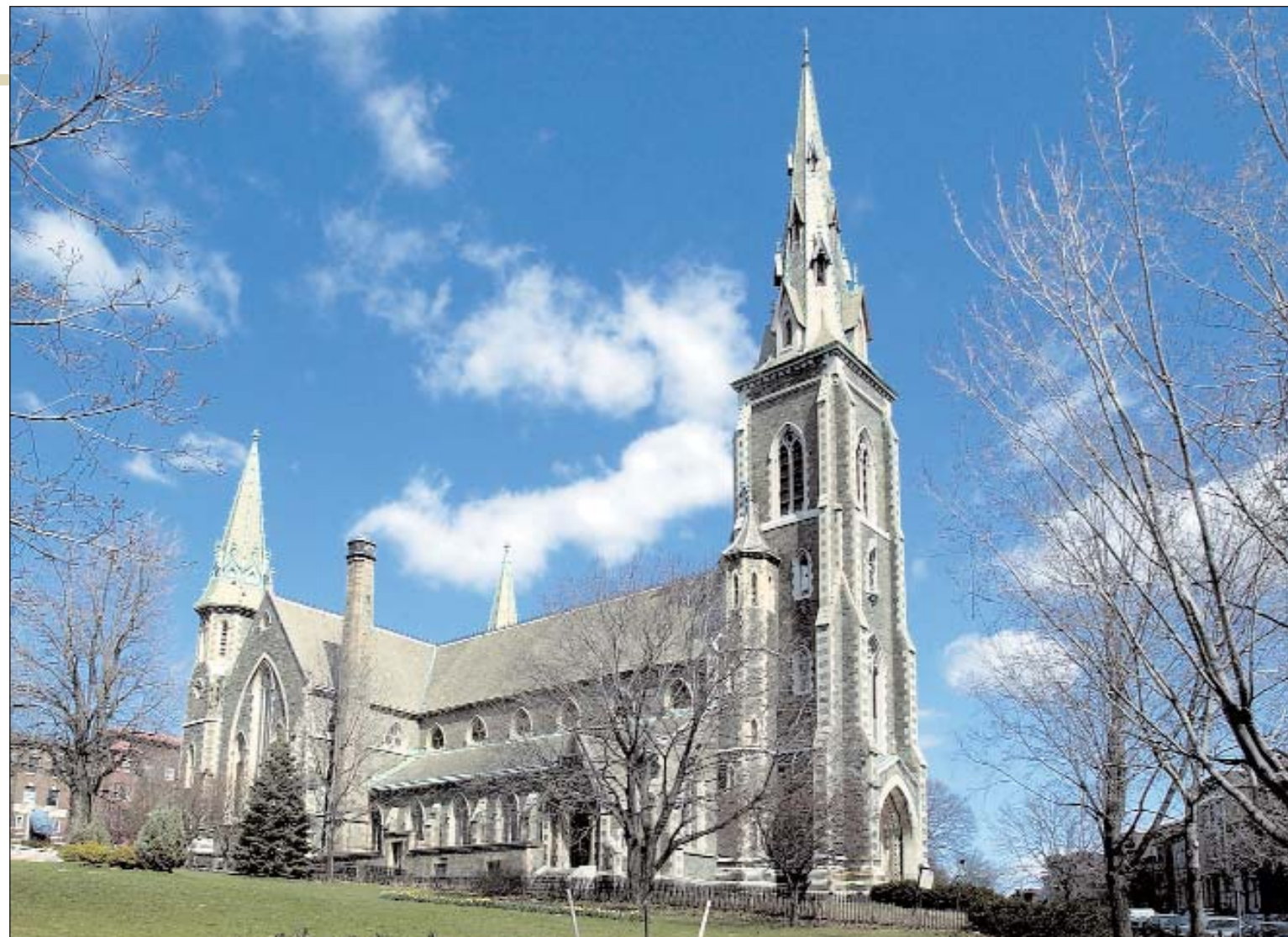
The sprawling stone church, designed by noted Architect Patrick Keeley, was completed in 1856 and has been a beloved part of Albany's skyline ever since. It held its last service in 1993 and was sold to a private owner, but it became the center of a court battle after the building deteriorated significantly and faced demolition.

"Patrick Keeley was one of, if not the most prolific, designers of Catholic churches in the country, and he considered this church his masterpiece," says Cohen, noting that Keeley also designed the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Many in the community felt such a loss would be intolerable.

The church was built in the mid-19th century for Irish lumber barons who inhabited the neighborhood. For generations, the church served as the community's center, surrounded on two sides by lush parks that are still maintained by the city.

"It is a landmark visible from virtually every part of the city. It is an example of a class urban complex — an English village in a city. As an advocate for the preservation of the urban fabric we recognize that this church has to be utilized for some purpose that will make it an anchor for the neighborhood," says Cohen.

Cohen doesn't like to speculate about possible uses for the building, focusing instead on the task at hand, which is raising funds to shore up the property, but he says there has been interest in the building for public uses, including the possibility of it becoming a branch of the Albany Public Library.



St. Joseph's Church on Ten Broek Avenue in Albany awaits second-phase repairs that will seal the building until a civic-minded developer can be found to renovate the historic structure.

Left, Plumbing fittings of all colors and shapes are available at the Architectural Parts Warehouse of The Historic Albany Foundation.

Photographs by
Mike McMahon
/The Record