

YOU GROW, GIRL!

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By Liora Fishman

As a child growing up in the suburbs, gardening was a thing that my parents did for fun and a chore that I got roped into. My mom espoused the idea that there was “nothing better than the feeling of dirt beneath your fingernails.” On the contrary, I’d say, as I begrudgingly de-weeded flower beds in our backyard, there were quite a few things I could think of that were better than that: clean fingernails and air conditioning, first and foremost.

Then the pandemic hit. I was lucky enough to find myself in an apartment with outdoor space that looked particularly lonely without the greenery my mother championed. So I bought some flower beds and soil. I planted some seedlings. I was sure that in a couple of weeks I’d have my own little urban garden. It couldn’t be that hard,

right?



A plant on a windowsill overlooks a city street.

I learned quite quickly that there was such a thing as too much sun for some plants—even for sun-tolerant outdoor plants. My lavender plant died within a week, though I refused to give up on it until I was quite certain I was watering decomposed leaves. For other plants, the New York sun would never be enough. After suffering a few plant losses, I decided to retroactively do some research, and learned about the importance of native plants and zone planting schedules.

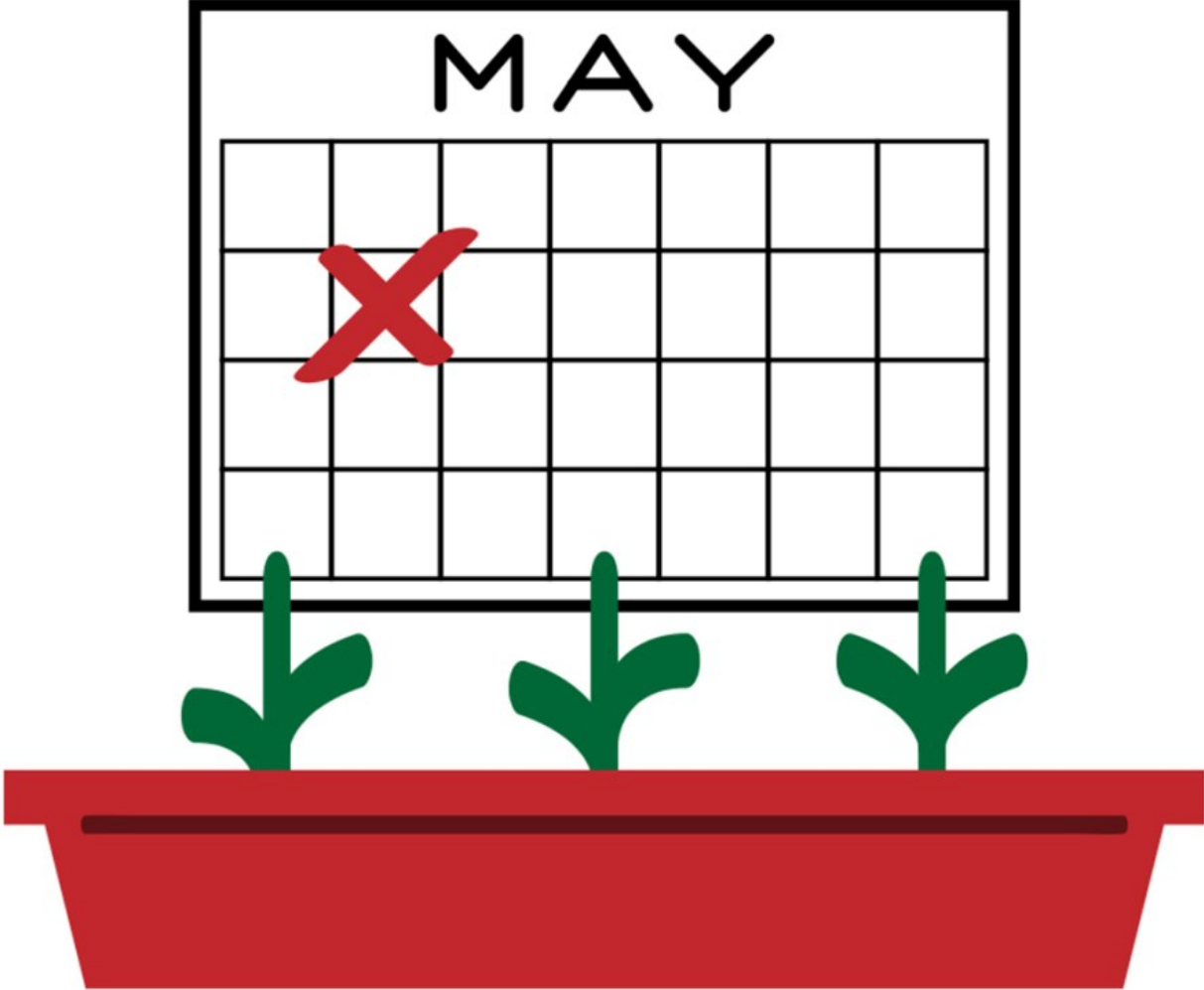


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Climate conditions are variable across the United States and there's a numerical zone system that dictates when one ought to plant, for example, squash versus broccoli. New York City is in Zone 7, meaning that most of the planting season spans May to September. Native plants are those that have, according to the National Wildlife Federation's website, "formed symbiotic relationships with native wildlife over thousands of years," and therefore offer the most sustainable habitat. "A plant is considered native if it has occurred naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction." For New Yorkers, this includes strawberries, wildflowers like milkweed, dogwood and native sunflowers.

Luckily for Coop members, the Produce team considers both the local growing zones and native plants when it curates the plant selection each season. Coop Produce Buyer Cecelia Rembert explains, "This year we added a new nursery that we worked with for our plant selections, called Glover Perennials, 'a family-run nursery specializing in plants that are native to the Northeast and perennials, based in Long Island.'"

Not only are all the plants from Glover Perennials native to the New York City area, they are also intended for long-term ownership: "Everything we got from Glover Perennials is going to come back every year—that's what a perennial is," says Rembert. "We're in Zone 7 and all of the plants we got aligned with Zone 7, too."



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That is, of course, contingent on you being able to keep your plants alive. And if you're like me, you've already killed your tomato and basil plants. "Gardening can be a real challenge in the summer in New York," Rembert said—a validating thing for a plant-killer to hear from a produce professional.

Despite giving off an air of leisure, gardening in New York City requires quite a bit of discipline and consistency. One must always take into consideration the sun exposure

your plants are getting. And if you got your plants from the Coop this year, it's likely that they need quite a bit of sun and regular watering. "Your plants need to be watered every day," explained Rembert. "When we were ordering the plants, we tended towards getting full-sun plants—so everything that everyone purchased from the Coop is sun-tolerant," which should, one hopes, last you through those 90+ degree days of New York summer.

Unfortunately, if you missed the early, cooler days of summer and spring, you may have also missed peak planting season. While that's not to say that you shouldn't try planting some sunflower seeds, the ideal time to do so is after Mother's Day, when the nighttime temperatures are generally above 40 degrees—why the Coop only offers plants for a limited time, beginning around April and ending in mid- to late June.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

A pot of bright green herbs, including basil, sage, mint, thyme and lavender.

“You don’t leave anything outside overnight until after Mother’s Day in New York,” explained Rembert when asked about the timing of the Coop’s plant season. “We do offer seeds prior to that, but the small plants will start coming in towards the end of April and can go into the ground once the nighttime temperatures are above 40 degrees.”

So what to do if you’re hoping to try your hand at plants this year? “Spring is the time that you should plant new plants. Gardeners can plant again in the fall, but we probably won’t provide any more plants in the fall,” said Rembert.

Timing the purchase of these plants can be quite tricky. The Coop works with partner farms like Glover Perennials to identify when plants have reached a stage where they haven’t quite flowered yet, but are ready to be uprooted and sold.

Given the fleeting plant season at the Coop, I asked Rembert if she could tell us some favorites we should keep an eye out for next year—or perhaps a sneak peek into next year’s plant selection. “We had really great peonies, and clematis. Clematis is one of my favorites that we offered,” said Rembert, referring to a lesser-known, purple flowering vine.



Sunlight shines through the leaves of a small potted plant.

And while the Coop will continue to prioritize native plants, you may see fewer florals next year. “We were a little heavy-handed with the native flowers, like meadow flowers, and that was a learning experience,” Rembert reflected.

But some things will never change: herb garden staples like basil and cilantro will return each year, and in fact, can be grown in the same pot if you’d like all your cooking herbs in one place. Rembert herself says, “It’s nice to have a selection of herbs—I grow them all in the same pot, and they come back every year. I’ll snip them as I’m cooking.”

While this year’s growing season has certainly been a tumultuous one for me (Rest in Peace, My Basil Plant, early June 2022 to mid-June 2022), Rembert left me feeling armed with the knowledge to succeed next year, and make do with what I haven’t killed for the remainder of the summertime.

Here's the thing: whether or not I excel at it, I actually *enjoy* gardening and intend to continue doing just that. Come spring, you'll find me immersed in the plant selection of the Coop, while Googling just how difficult it is to kill whatever plant is in stock that week.

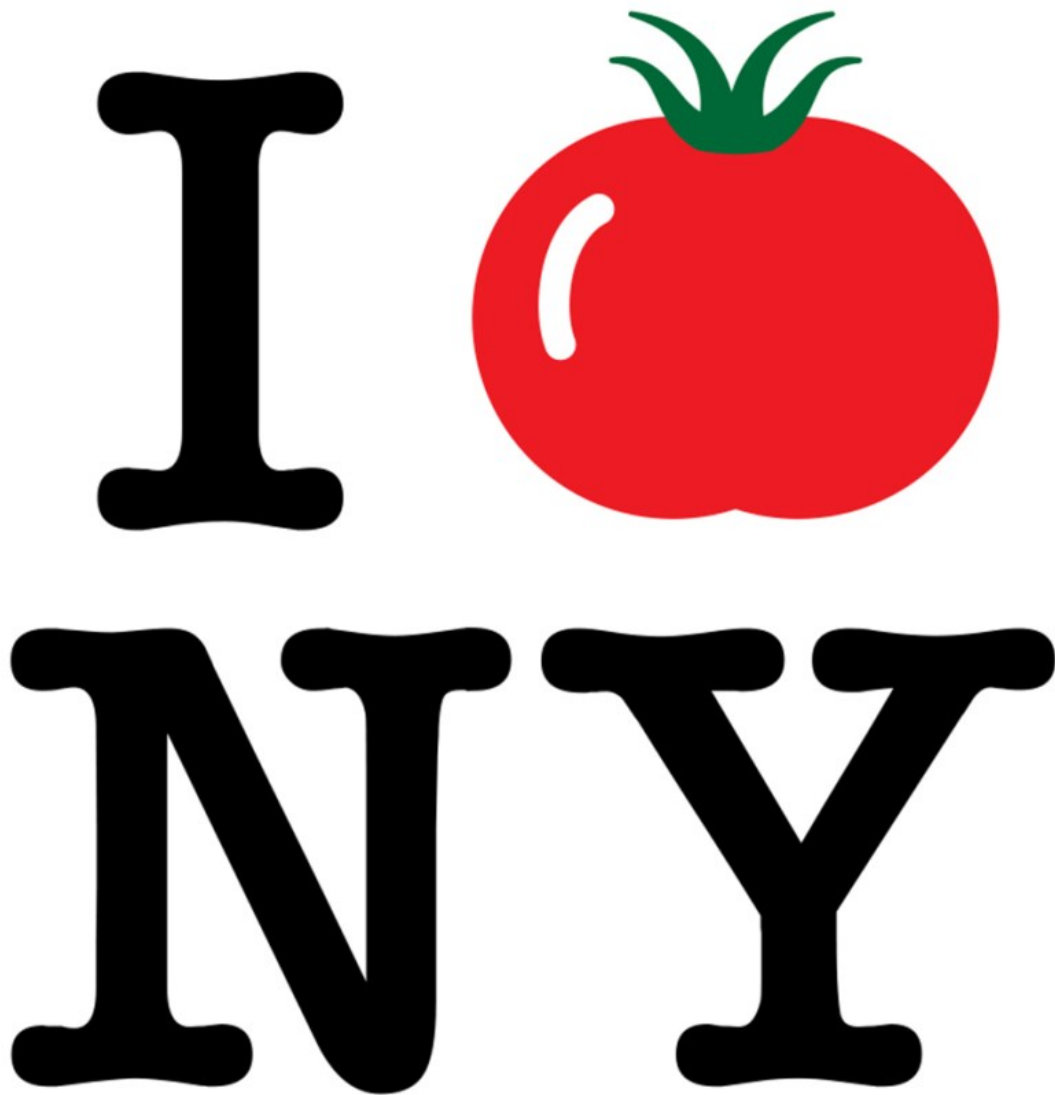


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In a time when our phones demand more attention than the outdoors do, it's refreshing to have a project that requires patience and consistency. Planting and growing a

garden lacks the instant gratification of social media and requires a kind of jovial discipline and commitment that's become harder and harder to come by. This, of course, means that I have to speak the words that just about anyone with parents is loath to say: my mom was right.

Liora Fishman joined the Coop recently, in December 2021. She lives in Prospect Heights and has a wonderful dog, Ollie, whom she loves very much.