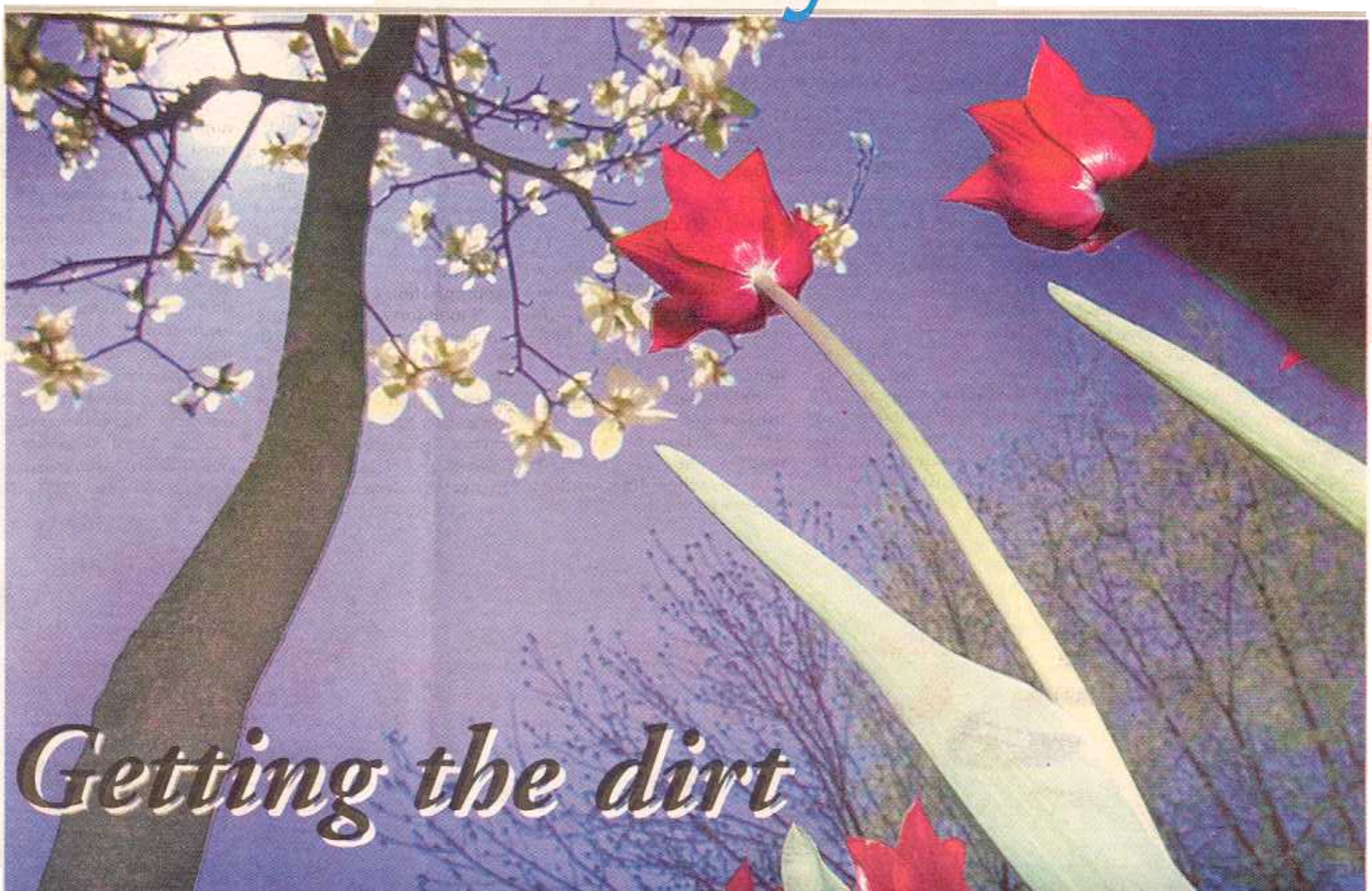
Lifestyle



Getting the dirt

Staff photos by Mike Voss

From a worm's eye view, one can notice the height of Robert F. Gabella's Elizabeth magnolia and Red Shine tulips in his front yard in Villa Park.

Horticulturist shares gardening passion

By Marie Lazzara
Staff writer

Gardens can be as large as a palatial estate or as small as a container.

To get into the hobby, you don't need to "plant" a lot of bucks. Creativity and common knowledge become useful fertilizer along with the real stuff. Just in case you do have questions sprouting in your mind, Villa Park resident and horticulturist Robert F. Gabella is only a Internet click away.

Gabella, 40, dispenses free gardening tips and addresses issues on his year-old gardening Web site, www.gardenopus.com. The site also offers newsletters and sells items such as ready-to-frame posters and note card sets. The artwork is based on Gabella's original photography.

His love for this field leads him to wear many hats. Gabella is a business consultant and an ad marketing manager for the Batavia-based Plantware, a greenhouse software company. In his role as an independent horticultural consultant, he has worked with private clients and commercial landscapers and on renovation projects for both Chicago's Soldier's Field and Wrigley Field. He also is a regular speaker on the garden club circuit.

Gabella is an Illinois Certified Nursery Professional and is a member of the Garden Writers' Association of America. He is working on an upcoming book called "Garden Opus," a compilation of horticultural essays he has written on such topics as the idiosyncrasies, challenges and silliness of popular and botanical plant names.

A young sprout

Gabella, who described himself as an "Army brat," was born in England but raised in Albert Lea, Minn. At age 3, Gabella began an affinity for gardening by noticing his maternal grandparents' work with dahlias, gladiolas, herbs and tomatoes.

"I picked up green tomatoes, and (I didn't) know what they were for," said Gabella, recalling one of his earliest vegetable experiences. "I was using them for my throwing arm practice against the fence post. My grandfather said, 'Wait a second, those are not what they are used for.' He showed me what was a ripe tomato and what wasn't ...

"I remember even that far back when I was picking up the tomatoes with his instruction, the fragrance of the tomato plants, the feel of them and the way the light hit the green tomatoes. That was the beginning of what I noticed of these little nuances of color, texture and fragrance that became attractive to me."

With the help of his parents, Gabella grew his own large gardens filled with varieties of plants, flowers and vegetables as a way to understand how they all grow.

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In the early 1980s, Gabella decided to study horticulture at the College of DuPage. To gain some experience, he worked at a local nursery part time and moved to Villa Park in 1987.

In 1988, he graduated from COD and began working in the landscape industry. He earned a bachelor's degree in business management from North Central College, Naperville. He eventually created a gardening newsletter and branched out in photographing plants and flowers in their natural states.

Referring to his own situations with plant life, Gabella explained that he "calls things out as I see them, as I experience them. If there's a plant that has either performed badly for me because it doesn't grow well in our area, has a disease problem or grows a little too well and becomes evasive, those are reasons not to plant something."

A design in mind

In the 10 years that Gabella has been doling out his expertise with garden clubs, there are basic questions on everyone's minds.

Common queries are what makes a garden and how can people garden on an affordable level. One way is using container gardens and purchasing combination planters.

"They have become extremely popular recently because they allow people to experiment with color and form on a much smaller scale, particularly if they don't have a lot of time to invest," he said. "The rewards are somewhat immediate and very satisfying.

"It's important for gardeners to understand that their joy can come out of the simplest levels."

Gabella's own garden, which starts out from the front and extends to the back, is a place of experimentation in horticulture and design. Gabella's garden inventory includes tall grasses, cacti, yucca glauca, different seedums. His back yard, which is half an acre, is home to asparagus, rhubarb, wetland shrubs, azaleas and bearded irises.

When beginning a garden, he explained some people consider geraniums, petunias and impatiens as the "bread and butter of the commercial nursery

trade." To discover new and unusual varieties, Gabella encourages gardeners to explore fresh and seeded offerings from retail catalogs and from Web sites. His recommendations include visiting www.stokesseeds.com or www.parkseed.com.

People ask him when they should prepare their lawns for spring and summer.

"My feeling is that if you can work comfortably outside after the middle of February, that's the time to start cleaning things up and cutting things down," said Gabella, who noted that residents enjoyed mild weather this March. He added that it was also the time to block off property and see what some of the problem areas are.

Fear not, late bloomers, for there is still time to plant before the hot weather comes.

"Some of the best gardens are planted into June from started plants," he said. "If you're starting seeds, there are a lot of seeds that can be planted in April. Hardy annuals and perennials can be planted outside. I began growing seeds indoors in December."

Providing protection

Proceeding from plants and flowers, Gabella dug into the area of vegetable gardening.

One issue is how to ward off animals, namely furry perpetrators such as rabbits and raccoons, from crops. Gabella suggested employing several barrier choices such as polytape fencing, which is an electrical fence that can be controlled by battery or a

solar-operating charging unit.

He said that there is some evidence that sonic devices whose high frequencies irritate animals work. Old-fashioned chicken wire does the trick as well.

With weed control, Gabella said removing the pesky plants by hand is preferable to chemical herbicides. Caring for soil is important as it helps plants and flowers grow to their fullest.

"A lot of gardeners forget that they need to incorporate organic matter in the soil for most types of plants," he said. "It has nutrients that go back into the soil, improves the aeration of the soil, increases the microorganic content of the soil as it breaks down."

Those who have gardening questions or want to learn more about Gabella can visit his Web site, www.gardenopus.com.

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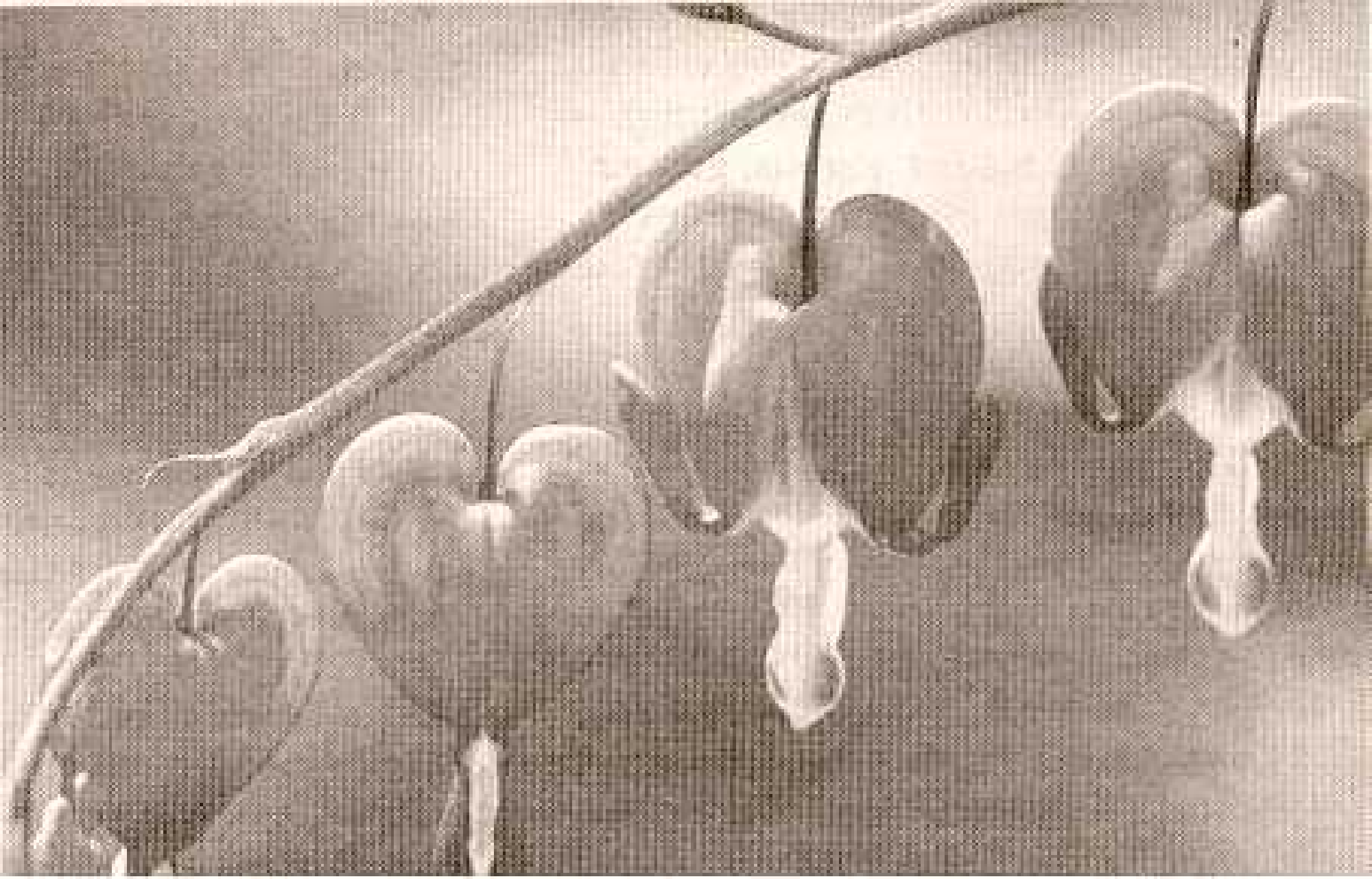

Staff photos by Mike Voss

Above, Gabella snaps off some asparagus growing in his back yard May 6. Gabella, a horticulturist, answers gardening questions at his year-old Web site. Top, Bleeding Hearts is a type of flower that grows in Gabella's garden. Other plants and flowers in Gabella's inventory include tall grasses, cacti, yucca glauca, seedums, wetland shrubs, azaleas and bearded irises.

Before getting down and dirty, read on...

By Marie Lazzara
Staff writer

With May closing out and June arriving, Robert F. Gabella has some suggestions for gardeners as they plan for the summer:

● Direct sow seeds of large, easy-to-handle flowers and vegetables in the ground. Flowers which give good results and plenty of quick color when sown by early June include nasturtiums, zinnias, marigolds, cosmos and calendulas. Vegetables include beans, carrots, corn, squashes and early maturing varieties of melons.

● Likewise, summer bulbs which will provide color by frost if planted by early June include dahlias, gladiolus, cannas, caladiums and elephant ears. Check that bulbs purchased late are solid, firm, with a heavy feel for their size and free from rot, or excessive or distorted sprouts.

● Outdoor combination planters can be easily assembled. To save money, combine a few premium annuals in the latest varieties, often available singly in pots, with the more inexpensive types sold in packs. Throw in a tropical foliage plant or two for interest. Seven to 10 plants in a 14- or 16-inch tub is usually plenty. When planting, use a good quality container mix, a slow release flower food and absorbent polymer crystals (to reduce moisture stress) according to package directions.

● May to early June is really the last best chance before hot weather sets in to patch rough areas of lawn or establish new turf from seed. Fork the soil thoroughly, add organic amendments and or organic/conventional lawn starter food (of course no weed control ó that will prevent the seeds from sprouting), rake the surface to a slightly roughed-up level, sow the seed, rake lightly in, and firm by walking over a board or sheet of plywood. Once you or the rain waters the seed, unless it rains continuously, you are married to it for daily watering for a week to 10 days until it sprouts!

● Lightly prune or trim shrubs before hot weather sets in, water well after shearing, and try to avoid garish poodle cuts, top heavy hack jobs which shade lower branches and worsen snow load, or chopping away at overgrowth.