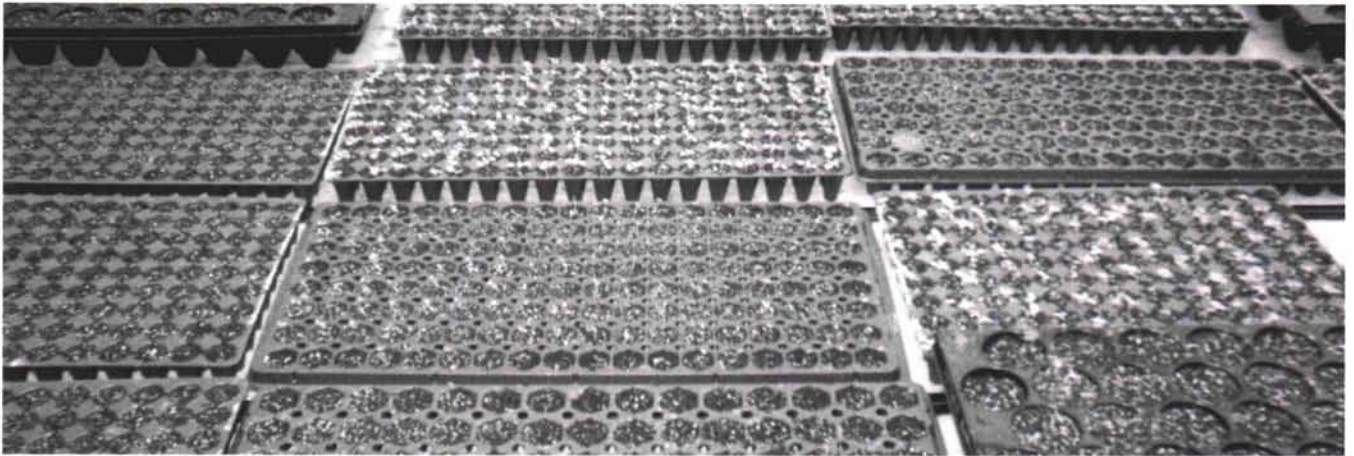


## ASK THE "EXPERT"

**Marc Van Camp**

Manager, Friendship Park Conservatory  
Des Plaines, IL

# Try Some Homegrown



*The Friendship Park Conservatory is located at 395 Algonquin Road in Des Plaines, IL. The facility is comprised of an indoor atrium (along the lines of the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago, but on a smaller scale; classrooms for recreational programming and rental space are available to the public). We do a lot of wedding business and it is a beautiful and tranquil setting for any gathering.*

*Consider that for a start-up investment of a couple hundred dollars and with as little as 50 square feet of shop space, you can start up to 500 plants for use on your course.*

When you enter our property, you are greeted with a series of gardens connected by meandering pathways. You will see a rose garden, herb garden and an aquatic garden among other thematic presentations. Inside the building, soft music and sculpture enhance the genteel atmosphere we seek to convey.

The heart and soul of the facility is our state-of-the-art 10,000-square-foot greenhouse, where we produce 99% of the plant material we display. As an agency of the Mount Prospect Park District, we are responsible for the outdoor park gardens situated throughout the district and we provide container plant material for district offices and recreation centers.

Golf course superintendents are certainly familiar with the job that plant culture is. A lot of commonality exists between our respective businesses, in that when the greenhouse is 110 degrees, delays and excuses don't cut the mustard. You have to act quickly or your crop is toast and yesterday's successes don't mean a thing.

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Flowers add beauty to almost any setting and an effective presentation can truly enhance your golf course. I have seen area golf courses with floral beds that rival those at the Art Institute. Some of you really know your beans when it comes to flowers.

### This article isn't for you.

You other guys—you know who you are—instead of heading down to the local nursery for a couple flats of annuals, do you know that you can get a much bigger bang for your buck if you grow your own?

Consider that for a start-up investment of a couple hundred dollars and with as little as 50 square feet of shop space, you can start up to 500 plants for use on your course. You can make up the capital cost in one year so next time you only spend money on seed, potting soil and the time it takes you to set up your light table.

### Materials: a checklist

Get a sheet of 3/4" plywood and enough 2" by 4" lumber to frame it out. Set the legs high enough so you (or the retired person you hire to do this) doesn't have to do a lot of bending while working. Drill a couple of holes in the table so water can drain. Set up a framework from which lights can be suspended. I've found that thin wall electrical conduit works well for this purpose. Four to six double-bulb fluorescent light fixtures (4" bulb) are hung from sash chain and spaced evenly over the table. Configure this so the lights can be raised or lowered as needed. Each light fixture should be equipped with one cool-white and one warm-white bulb. If space is a problem, hinge the framework so the entire assembly can be folded up and stored when you're not using it. Additional framing set midway from the floor to the table surface and covered with hardware

cloth makes a handy space to store pots and other material. This also makes the table sturdier.

Now you're going to need some cold frames; I'll explain their purpose a little later. A cold frame is rectangular in shape (2' or 3' by 4' or 5' works well), fitted with a Plexiglas lid hinged on one side. The rear side should be higher than the front; use 2" by 10" lumber for the back and 2" by 4" for the front. Cut the sides so the lid is supported on all four sides. When you are done, the cold frame should look like a cheesy display case. Each cold frame will hold about (50) 4" pots or four or five flats, so make enough to hold your crop. Feel free to use whatever material you have lying around. For example, old storm windows make great covers. You can use concrete blocks to elevate the cold frame to the proper height; again, use whatever you've got. Find a sheltered spot outside next to a building on a sunny south-facing wall and set them there.

Get some seedling trays, flats or 4" plastic pots (check your catalogues—they're pretty cheap), some potting soil (metromix) and some packages of seeds. For

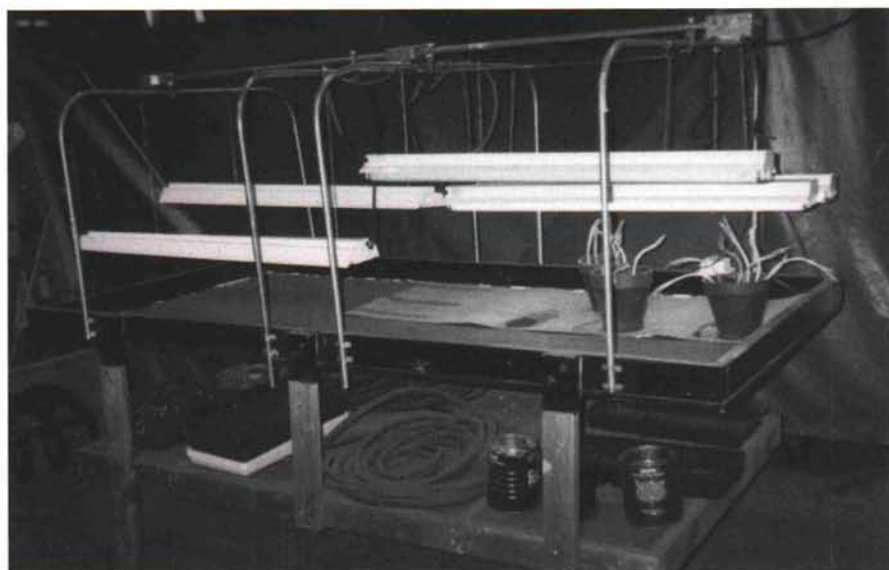
starters, try something easy like marigolds, petunias or salvia (you can try some more exotic varieties next time) and have at it.

### Timing tips

Set up your light table and sow your seeds in early March, turn the lights on and keep them on, keep the seeds moist—you know what to do.

Ten days to two weeks after germination, take the seedlings that look good and transplant them to your flats or 4" pots. When it looks like the weather is going to stay above freezing at night, move the flats or pots to your cold frames, but don't take your table down yet; you might need it if the weather gets bad. The cold frames keep the heat in and the plants gradually harden; again, keep them moist, use a little foliar fertilizer (10-10-10) every second or third watering and wait.

Old-timers put several inches of manure on the bottom of the cold frames and nestle the flats into it. The manure helps to insulate the interior and actually provides some heat as it decomposes. If it gets unseasonably warm (like this year), prop the




Light table.



Side view of FPC cold frames with lid propped open for air circulation on warm days.

*Bringing plant material in from seed is pretty light work, but it can be time-consuming. It's perfect for a retired person looking for some golf privileges; you know better than I do how to work that angle.*

frame covers open so the crop doesn't cook. If the weather turns really cold, less than 30 degrees for several days, you're going to need to bring the crop back inside. Don't worry—they'll survive just fine for several days. If we're really unlucky weather-wise and we have a long cold snap, rotate them on your light table or cut your losses and thin your crop down to a manageable size.

do your entire golf course. If you try this procedure and you like the results, I guarantee the bed that gets your plants will be your favorite bed that year. Give us a call at 847-298-3500 and our master gardeners will be happy to advise you and answer any questions you may have. 

When you feel comfortable that it is time to plant your annuals (mid to late May), plant them in your golf course beds with a little granular 10-10-10 tilled into the soil and you're done. Right! Now comes the weeding and watering etc., but you've got staff for that. Which brings up the staffing issue . . . I've been told that March and April can be a pretty busy time for golf course superintendents. Bringing plant material in from seed is pretty light work, but it can be time-consuming. It's perfect for a retired person looking for some golf privileges; you know better than I do how to work that angle.

Don't bite off more than you can chew. Start with one light table and see how you like it. Unless you put together a greenhouse, you're never going to be able to produce enough plants to



Author Marc Van Camp watering plant material.