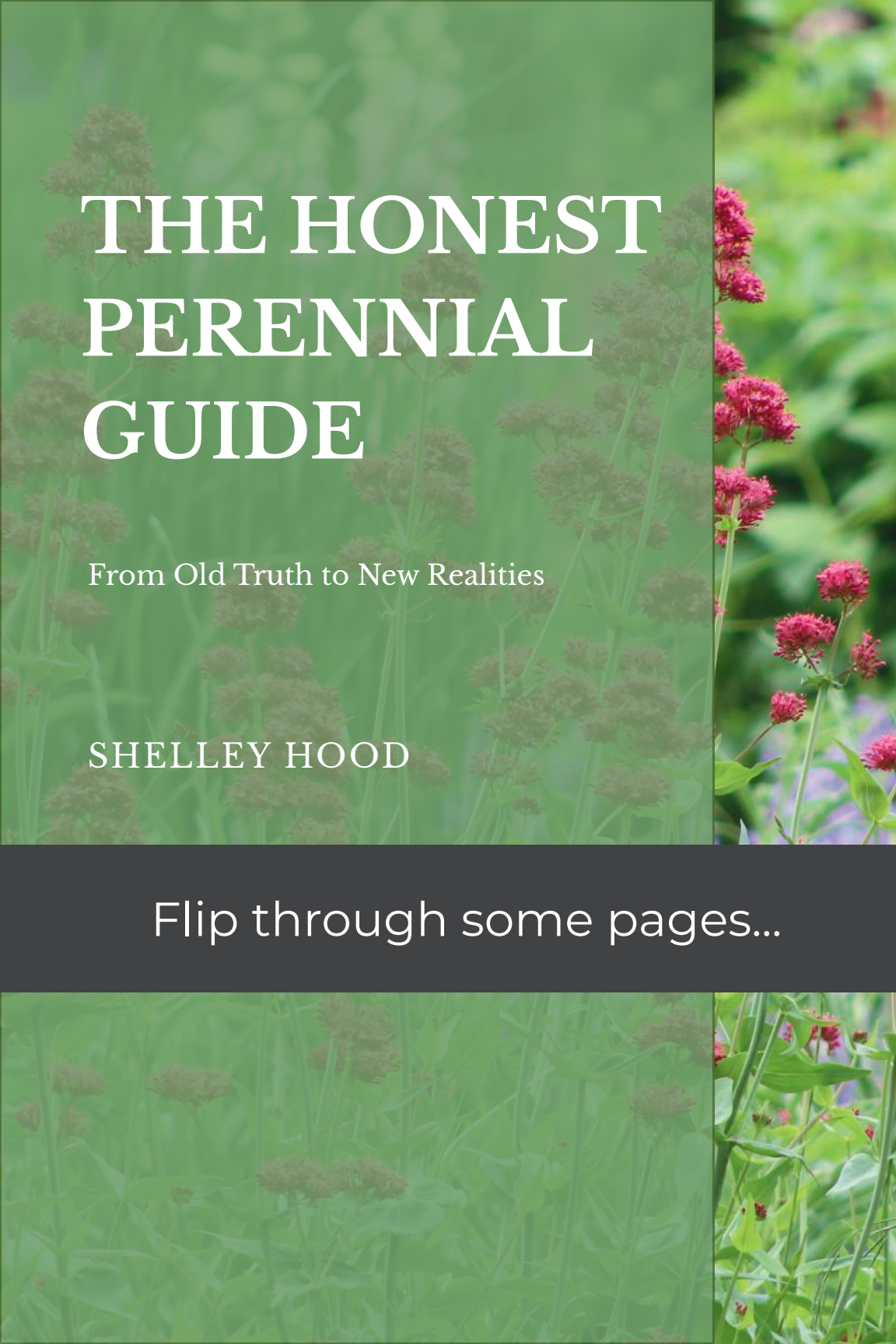




THE HONEST PERENNIAL GUIDE

From Old Truth to New Realities

SHELLEY HOOD

Flip through some pages...



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Every May long weekend of my childhood, I'd tag along with my mom as she loaded the car with impatiens, petunias, and geraniums. The ritual was as predictable as the holiday itself: pick the brightest plants, fill the baskets and gardens, and water every evening.

Those annuals bloomed reliably until frost, then vanished. There was comfort in the certainty — no surprises, no disappointments. For me, what I watched my mom do all those years was gardening.

I was an adult before I realized I could grow plants that returned year after year. Neighbours shared their perennials, and I watched them emerge each spring, stronger than before. It felt like a miracle. I was hooked.

Over time, I visited gardens across Canada, the U.S., and Europe. I began to see the difference between gardens as seasonal décor - the kind I grew up with, and those that made something shift inside you. Like you were entering another world entirely.

When we moved to our Ontario farm in 2020, I carried that vision with me. I knew what I wanted to achieve: to model those gardens - and inspire and educate others to create their own. What I didn't yet know was how to get there. Arming the family with spades, we carved gardens out of lawn, and planted thousands of perennials.

It was a living experiment —part trial by fire, part stubbornness, and always learning. What I learned often didn't line up with what I expected, but the goal remains the same: to build beautiful, lasting gardens and help others do the same. Now I see the path.

This is the book I wish I had when I started.



Introduction

It didn't take long to realize the scale of what I had taken on. That first year on the farm, to create gardens with the kind of impact I envisioned, I ordered 15,000 perennial plugs from the commercial catalogue. I chose for height and colour, assuming that traits like movement, longevity, pollinator value, and scent were implied by the very word perennial.

By the next season, those assumptions started to crack. Some plants did exactly what I hoped, coming back stronger. Others never showed up again. Some stood stiff instead of moving with the wind. Pollinators crowded certain blooms while ignoring others. And for plants where I expected fragrance, there was none.

What I was really learning was that choosing plants was going to take more than trusting a tab in a catalogue — it required knowledge I didn't yet have.

The Knowledge Maze

I went looking for guidance — from gardening books and industry manuals to YouTube and Facebook groups.

It seemed every “expert” contradicted the other. If you drew a Venn diagram of their advice, there would be the thinnest sliver where they agreed.

I now understand why. One world relies on ancestral knowledge — passed down through generations, from when “perennial” meant it would truly last.

The other reflects the world today, where modern breeding impacts basic plant reproduction.

That’s when I stopped looking for advice and turned to relying on observation — and a few trusted YouTube mentors.

The Pivot Point

My pivot point came in the second summer, when I tried to reorder my successful plants. The perennial section that had been so exciting the year before had shrunk by about 70%, while the annuals section had grown.

I was annoyed by the lack of selection, but what really bothered me was realizing I wasn't in control. I couldn't build on the plants that had worked — I had to start over. And given this was only my second year, I had to assume this churn would happen every year.

So, I decided I'd just grow the plants myself. But that's when the second blow hit: some garden favourites couldn't even be grown from seed — or reproduced by me at all.

That one-two punch — no control over what I could order, and no way to grow certain plants myself — was the closest I came to giving up. I could either accept it, walk away, or turn it on its head.

I chose to turn it on its head.

The Big Rethink

Navigating what I could grow — and then how I could grow it, took me miles from the design world I thought I'd be immersed in by this point.

But once I let that “let’s rethink everything from scratch” genie out of the bottle, there was no putting it back.

Over the following years, I pulled apart every piece of the process — how plants are grown, sold, labeled, packaged, and even how they’re categorized.

And now, I’ve narrowed it down to 80 plants that have truly earned their place in my garden and designs.

This is the outcome of that living lab — the mistakes and the patterns that emerged from watching how hundreds of varieties behave across thousands of plants.

Learning Organically

My plant knowledge isn't academic or inherited. It comes from firsthand observation of plants I've grown, tested, and watched over multiple seasons.

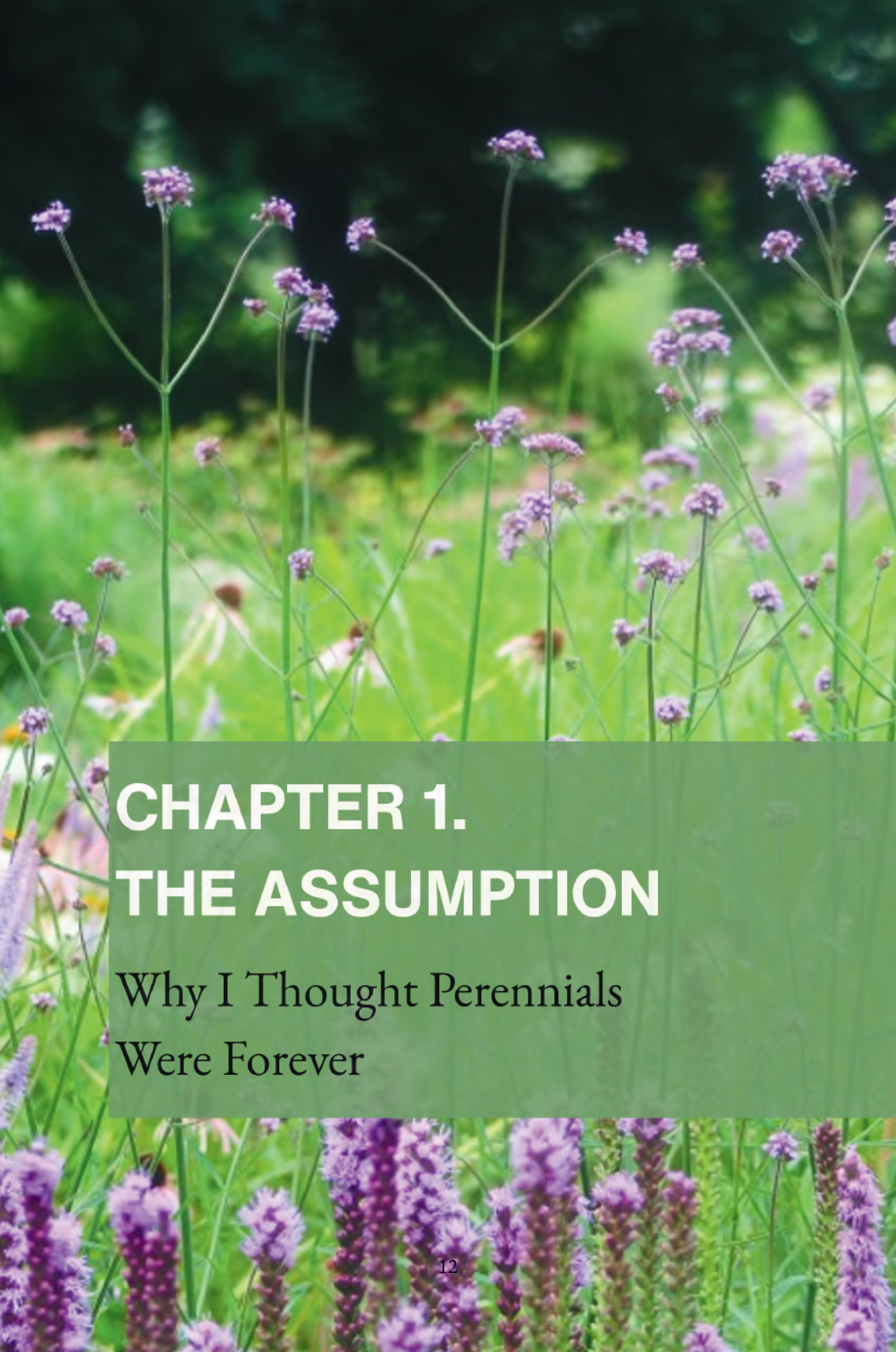
Looking back, my fresh eyes turned out to be an advantage. I wasn't weighed down by what was supposed to be true — so I could clearly see what was.

If you're reading this with confidence in your own plant knowledge — ancestral or otherwise — I invite you to set it aside, even just for a moment, and see gardening through my eyes.

This book is part story, part guide: what I discovered about perennials, and the practical lessons you can use to build your own gardens.

- ▶ **Section One** looks at what “perennial” really means today — starting with the assumptions many of us make, through the growing and production practices that shape a plant’s future, to the surprising resilience of true perennials.
- ▶ **Section Two** shares how I came to think differently about plants in the garden — and the tools I developed along the way.
- ▶ **Section Three** brings it all together with my own curated palette, and guidance for creating a personal palette of your own.

Taken together, these sections are about more than plants. They’re about moving beyond trial-and-error and giving you the confidence to build your dream garden.

The background of the page is a lush garden scene. The upper portion features tall, thin green stems with clusters of small, light purple flowers. Below this, a semi-transparent green rectangular box contains the chapter title and subtitle. The bottom portion of the page shows a dense field of purple flowers, likely lavender, with green leaves and stems.

CHAPTER 1.

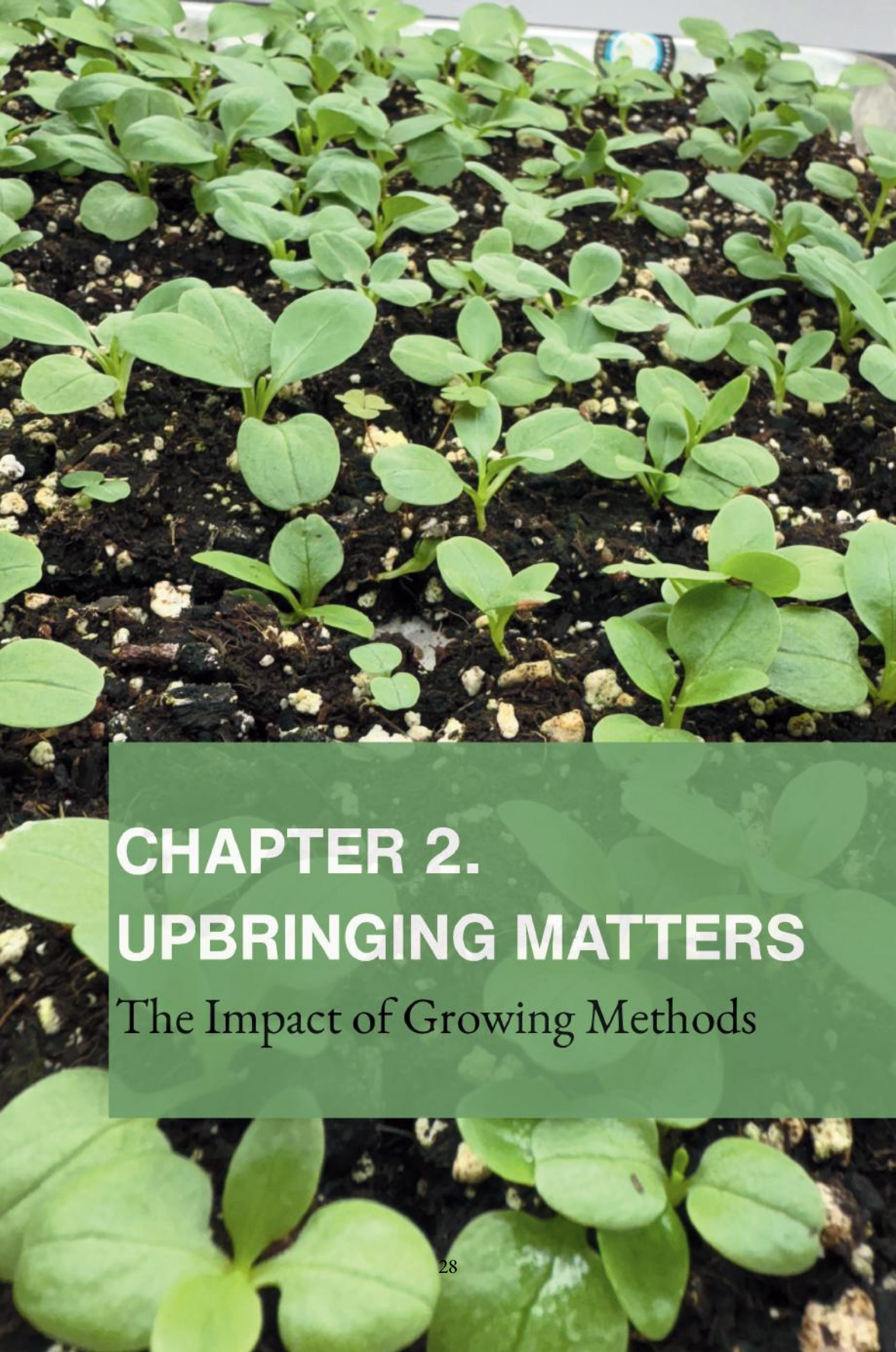
THE ASSUMPTION

Why I Thought Perennials
Were Forever

When I first stepped into perennial gardening, I noticed how often people talked about seed. Saving it, swapping it, scattering it around for next year's garden. There's a romance to the idea: you grow a beautiful flower, collect a handful of seeds, and nature refills the garden for free.

So when I decided I was going to grow everything from seed, I assumed I could. Then I discovered something that I hadn't anticipated: there are countless modern day perennials that you can't grow from seed at all.

And, if you can't assume a plant will produce a seed, you can't assume it will behave like a perennial.

A close-up photograph of a seedling tray filled with numerous small, green seedlings. The seedlings have two rounded leaves and are growing in dark soil mixed with small white perlite granules. A semi-transparent green rectangular box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the chapter title and subtitle in white text.

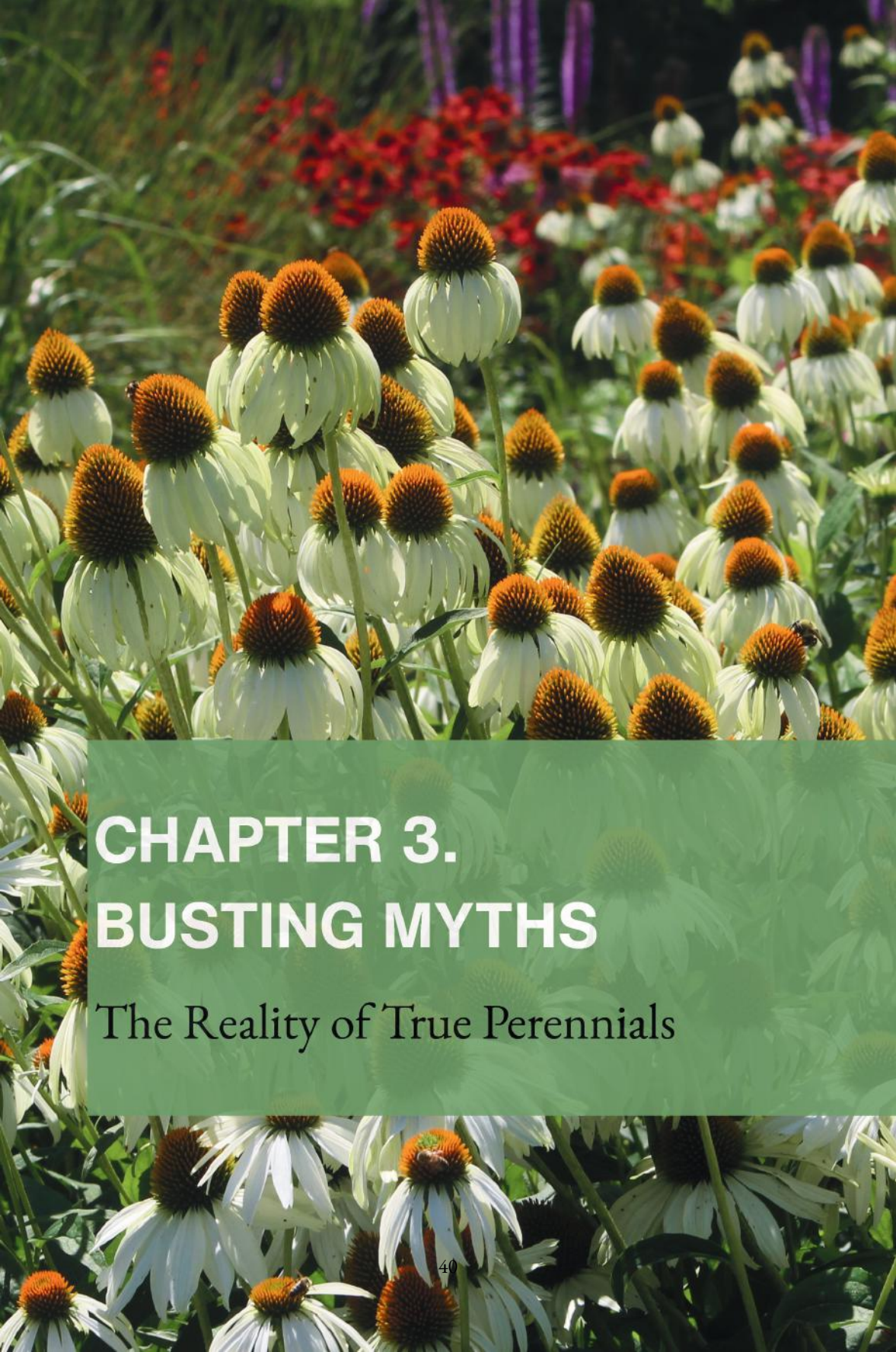
CHAPTER 2.

UPBRINGING MATTERS

The Impact of Growing Methods

Now that I understood why I couldn't grow everything I wanted, I shifted my focus to what I *could* grow: plants from seed, roots I could order in, and the varieties that still allowed me to take control of the process.

But as with everything in gardening, "how to grow" turned out to be far more complicated than pot, soil, and water. The way a plant is raised impacts how well it will adapt, and its long term prognosis.



CHAPTER 3.

BUSTING MYTHS

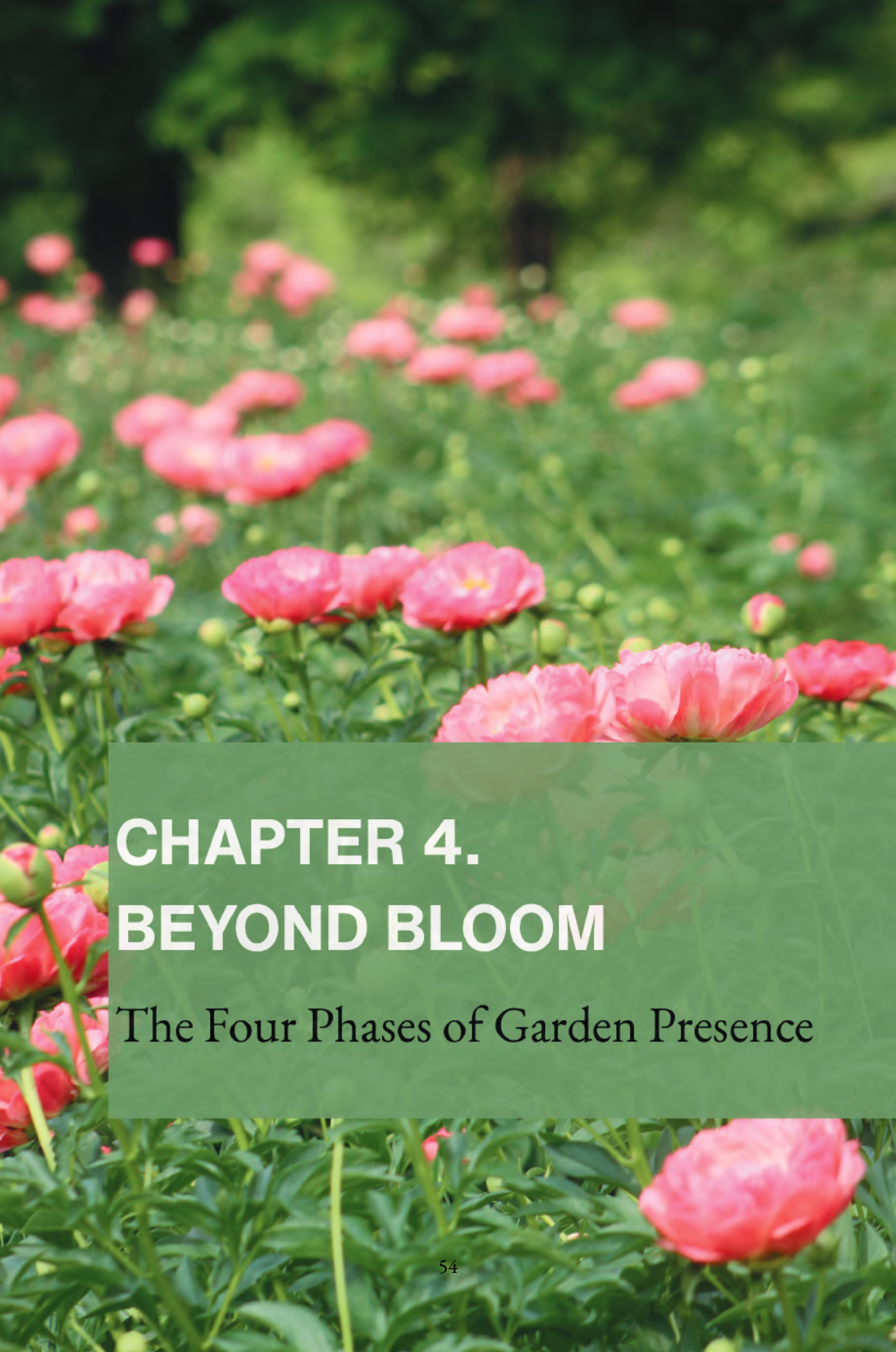
The Reality of True Perennials

True Perennials are far more resilient than you may think.

The first lesson came from thirty White Swan coneflowers I planted along a tree line in my first garden. I hadn't yet realized those trees would shade them for most of the day — four hours of sun on a good day, when the tag demanded full sun. I expected disappointment. By midsummer they were thriving, just a little shorter than usual.

That's when I stopped treating the tag as gospel and started thinking of it like dietary advice: the ideal might be salads every day, but the occasional cake won't hurt you.

True Perennials have deep roots, the ability to recover, and multiple seasons to adapt. Once I understood this, I started pushing boundaries with placement, timing, zones — and discovered that most of what we're told about growing requirements is far more rigid than reality.



CHAPTER 4. **BEYOND BLOOM**

The Four Phases of Garden Presence

Once I understood the complexity behind perennials — how breeding, growing methods, and conditions all changed their behaviour — I realized I needed a way to simplify it. If I couldn't make sense of it, I assumed most gardeners would struggle too.

That's what pushed me to create my own systems. I needed tools that stripped away the noise and focused on what actually mattered: how long a plant contributes, how it works with others, and how it fits the kind of garden I wanted to create.

This section shares those tools. They started as survival strategies for me, but they turned into frameworks that others can use as well. If they helped me cut through the overwhelm, I trust they can do the same for you.

A photograph of a garden filled with pink coneflowers (Echinacea) with bright orange-brown centers. A yellow and black butterfly is perched on one of the flowers. The background is a soft-focus green lawn and trees. A semi-transparent green box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the chapter title and subtitle.

CHAPTER 8. MY PALETTE

80 Plants & Infinite Design Possibilities

This isn't a "Top 80" list. Read through the palette to understand my thinking and why I made certain choices — to reinforce the concepts introduced in the book in a tangible way.

As gardeners, we're all different, so my exact choices may not all fit your taste or conditions. But if you understand why these plants made the cut, you'll be equipped to build your own version with confidence.

To make it easier to zoom in on specific goals, I've grouped the palette into broad themes you can use directly: Cottage Classics, Prairie Favourites, Drought Warriors, or Shade Lovers.

The fun can be in mixing them. These groups are intended to provide flexible entry points, not boxes to keep plants in.

Cottage Classics



I've always loved cottage gardens. Whether I'm flipping through magazines, watching *Gardeners' World*, or walking through living gardens that really embody the style, I'm drawn to their fullness—very flowing, almost chaotic, and lush. You're never going to see a true cottage garden with a plant and then an area of mulch between plantings. It's dense, mixed, and layered.

But it's not by coincidence that the most beautiful cottage gardens are seen in climates with consistent rainfall. It's that rain that creates the natural lushness we associate with cottage garden magic.

When I started emulating that look here in North America, I had to learn this the hard way. I love the plants so much—delphiniums, foxgloves, hollyhocks—that I was putting them everywhere, mixing them with my drought-tolerant workhorses. This was a mistake from a maintenance perspective.

What I've learned is that supporting cottage garden style in my climate takes more thoughtful planning. I make sure my cottage plantings are grouped together, for a more coherent effect, and so I'm not dragging hoses through my globe thistle to get to my delphiniums.

Cottage gardens are definitely worth the effort. They're stunning, lush, emotive, romantic.

The Cottage Keepers

Number	Plant Name	Plant Set	Colour
1	Bee Balm 'Panorama Mix'	Staple	Mixed
2	Bee Balm 'Panorama Red'	Staple	Red
3	Bee Balm 'Snow White'	Staple	White
4	Columbine 'Early Selection Mix'	Staple	Mixed
5	Columbine 'Nora Black Barlow'	Diva	Purple
6	Delphinium 'Magic Fountain Mix'	Diva	Mixed
7	Delphinium 'Pacific Giant Mix'	Diva	Mixed
8	False Sunflower 'Bleeding Hearts'	Staple	Yellow
9	False Sunflower 'Summer Nights'	Workhorse	Yellow
10	Foxglove 'Camelot Cream'	Staple	Cream
11	Foxglove 'Foxy'	Staple	Mixed
12	Geranium 'Rozanne'	Workhorse	Blue
13	Geum 'Tango'	Staple	Orange
14	Hollyhock 'Black Arabian Nights'	Diva	Dark red
15	Hollyhock 'Las Vegas'	Diva	Mixed
16	Lupine 'Russell Gallery Mix'	Diva	Mixed
17	Lupine 'Russell Gallery White'	Diva	White
18	Maltese Cross (Species)	Workhorse	Red
19	Oriental Poppy 'Brilliant'	Diva	Orange-red
20	Peony 'Coral Charm'	Workhorse	Coral
21	Peony 'Duchesse de Nemours'	Workhorse	White
22	Peony 'Sir Alexander Fleming'	Workhorse	Pink
23	Verbena 'Bampton'	Staple	Purple

Bee Balm

Garden Presence: *Tall foliage clumps build in spring; early to mid- summer blooms; seed heads hold some structure into fall*

Bee Balm can be complicated. Pollinators absolutely adore it, the scent is wonderful, and its presence in the garden is undeniable.

You do have to get the water right - too dry and it collapses. Too wet and powdery mildew sets in. It's not a no-maintenance plant. I accept its flaws rather than mess with it too much.

Still, when it's on, it's really on. Clumps spread and form natural clusters that create big drama. *Panorama Red* is a stunner, and I grow *Snow White* to bring elegance to a white garden.

I do have a soft spot for mixed coloured plants, so I keep *Panorama Mix* for when I'm looking for the softness that comes from variation, over a bold blanket of colour.

Lesson Learned

Bee balm thrives with *steady* moisture. Keep it consistently moist: too dry for too long and it dies; dry followed by wet and mildew takes over.

Bee Balm Keepers

Name	Plant Set	Zone	Breeding Type	Why I Use It	Design Feature
Monarda didyma ‘Panorama Red’	Staple	4–9	Modern selection; seed-grown, self-sows lightly	Bold red with strong presence	Dense clumps that anchor a garden
Monarda didyma ‘Snow White’	Staple	4–9	Modern cultivar; vegetative propagation	Clean white accent, especially in themed plantings	Tall clusters of pure white blooms
Monarda didyma ‘Panorama Mix’	Staple	4–9	Modern selection; seed-grown, self-sows lightly	A mix of bloom colours bring cottage garden variety in a single plant.	Tall clusters of mixed blooms

Bee Balm Cuts

- ❖ Monarda *Jacob Cline* was too short with serious mildew tendencies.

Order the Full Guide

