

T H E A R T S & M E D I A

LIVING

# Power Gardening

An earthy hobby has been transformed into a status game by boomers with plenty of money to mulch

By NANCY GIBBS



**\$59 GARDEN VEST**  
Only eight pockets will do for the real diggerati



**\$46 PLIANT PANTS**  
Japanese, farmer-style



**\$25 KID GLOVES**  
Good enough for church

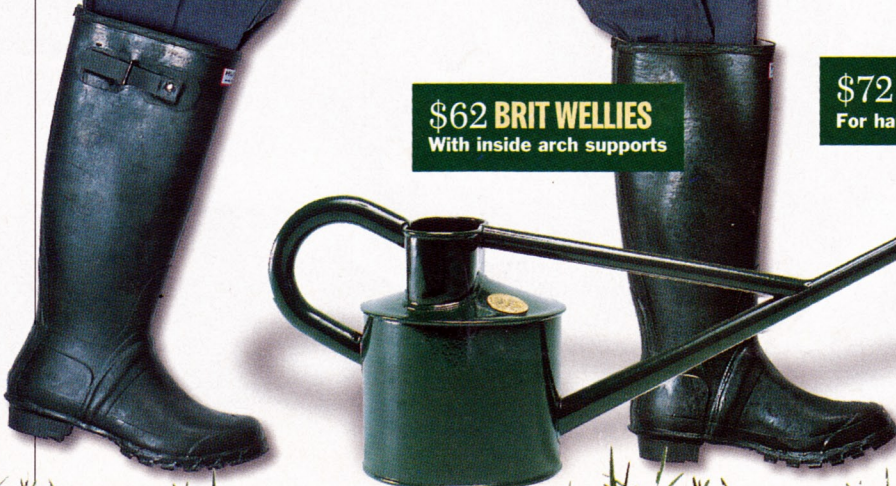


**\$42 PRUNERS**  
The Swiss-made Felco have a nifty leather holster



**\$26 KNEEPADS**  
Cushion the knees and prevent ground-in dirt

\$8.1 million, sat on the soft housing market for years, the bank that repossessed it hired garden designer Eric Solberg. "We put in a \$45,000 garden, and the house sold like that," he says.



**\$62 BRIT WELLIES**  
With inside arch supports

**\$72 HAWS CAN**  
For hard-to-reach places

There is nothing new about such conceits, of course. "Snobbery and gardening have gone hand in hand for hundreds of years," argues Pollan. There have always been those who plant old roses with good bloodlines, he explains, and those who go for high-tech hybrid teas with names like Chrysler Imperial—"a rose named after a car, for God's sake." What's different today, he observes, is that gardening has become such a fad. "You can pour vast sums of money into an acre of land and acquire the patina of sophisticated gardening very quickly." Horticultural so-

paid in muscle and devotion, applied to a few packages of seeds, some cuttings from a neighbor, a pile of compost distilled from last fall's leaves. To the purists, paying someone extravagant sums to install an instant garden is like hiring someone to have great sex for you.

Yet power gardening makes sense in an age of downward mobility, when a middle class eager to stem a free fall will grasp at affordable luxuries. They can't afford 500 acres in Shropshire, or even a house as big as their parents', but there is some solace in growing their own endive. For those anxious about the fate of the family, the garden at least offers the illusion of control, of nurturing something that won't run wild the minute it reaches adolescence. Those nostalgic for a simple, agrarian past can siphon the sense of virtue attached to the idea of a family farm, like Marie Antoinette tending her miniature dairy at the Petit Trianon. Grow a bushel of peas, and you have rooted your family in the American heartland.

The marketing experts have their own theories about why people want to sink so much money into the soil. A garden is certainly a nice thing to have, a place to unplug from a bruising, harried world into someplace ripe and unwired. For cocooning boomers, gardening presents the perfect stay-at-home hobby. It's environmentally correct, medically sound, and promises a nice return on investment. When a Bel Air, California, replica of Versailles, built for