Welcome Back Terrariums

This retro trend is back and consumers are eating it up. How can you take this simple glass garden and bring the trend back into your stores?

By Robin Seaton Jefferson





Terrariums are independent glass ecosystems that can sustain not only plant life but animal life as well.

errariums, those tantalizing miniature conservatories, are making a comeback as art projects, in-home décor and gardeners' delights. They are basically independent ecosystem under glass, a garden in a bottle. They are an exercise in ecology, horticulture and botany for all ages — not to mention an interesting new accent to decorate your yard with to add some extra depth.

Terrarium History

As early as 500 B.C., plants were kept under bell-shaped glass jars for exhibit. The terrarium in its modern form — the fern case — was invented by accident in 1827 by a London doctor named Nathaniel Ward whose ferns were dying from the fumes of London's factories. Ward also studied moths and caterpillars. While experimenting with a cocoon in a covered jar for observation, he noticed several plants, including a fern, had grown in the bit of soil at the bottom of the jar. Ward concluded that plants could flourish in London if they were protected under glass from the city's polluted air. He named his discovery fern cases.

Terrarium Creativity

Now known as Wardian cases or terrariums, the art of creating miniature greenhouses has taken on many forms and purposes since its inception. The practice gained unprecedented popularity in the 1970s as amateur botanists grew indoor gardens inside giant wine bottles and other grand and dominating glass containers. They fashioned their gardens into lamps and coffee table bases.

"Though the popularity of ordinary terrariums made from bottles and jugs, etc., faded with time, I have been making my living producing decorative terrariums for home decorating for more than 30 years now," said Ron Gladkowski, a self-taught stained glass terrarium designer. "I suspect that the concept has been brought to the surface recently thanks to the aid of the Internet."

"Decorating with stained glass has been around for hundreds of years, as has decorating with plants," Gladkowski said. "We humans like to have both artwork and living things in our surroundings." Other examples of such combinations are ceramic planters, sculpture gardens and handcrafted plant stands. "Terrariums offer another opportunity to exhibit artwork brought to life by the inclusion of plants," he said.

Gladkowski said there are several advantages to using terrariums as items of décor, including the practicality of the practice. "In today's homes, air-conditioning and heating systems often dry out the air to the detriment of house plants, making it difficult to keep them and requiring more attention and care. With a terrarium, the plants are contained in their own humidity-controlled environment in which they thrive and require very little care," he said. "Terrariums thrive on neglect and require only occasional watering and a bright area."



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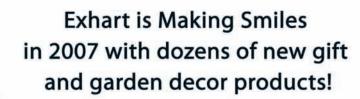




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Terrarium Education

On top of the terrarium's unique décor, there is also an educational aspect to the accent. Some companies sell terrarium kits of all kinds.

Grant Cleveland, owner of DuneCraft, Inc., a terrarium manufacturer, attributes his success to "...looking at popular themes and connecting terrariums to those themes," he said. He added that terrariums are regaining a lost popularity as individuals look to reestablish a connection with nature. "People love contact with nature and plants. So there's a lot of interest on the part of the physical natural world around them."

Cleveland said terrariums make great home décor items because people just naturally love to look at them. "All terrariums have that aesthetic component to them."

Other Terrarium Uses

Explorers in the Victorian era were well known keepers of terrariums as they brought back from their travels exotic plants to their European homeland. The climate was too harsh to successfully grow the plants outside, so special cases were made of glass to cultivate the rare treasures. The evolution of the terrarium, or vitrine, as it was then called, continued and peaked during the 1960s and 1970s when they again became fashionable conversation pieces.

Today, the term terrarium also can refer to the keeping of small animals such as reptiles, amphibians, arachnids and so on. There are also companies in the market that are taking terrariums to a new level, offering homeowners a peek at more than plants, such as the natural habitats of the animals that live among them.

Terrarium Style

"Terrariums are a wonderful way to bring the outdoors in," said Brini Maxwell, host of The Brini Maxwell Show on the Style Network. "The delicacy and charm of the tiny gardens help create a restful mood and create an emotional link to nature. I think the idea is having a resurgence for several reasons: It fits in beautifully with the current design trend of botanical representation in wallpapers and textiles, and it's a way to exert control over an environment at a time when people feel they have little or no control over what happens in the world and their lives."

Maxwell suggests retailers invest in vintage apothecary jars to stock one-of-a-kind items in which their customers could create terrariums. "The ones with the ground-glass seals for the lid are most effective for proper moisture retention," said Maxwell. Small plants that are found together in nature are also necessary for creating the mini ecosystems that recycle water and nutrients through the plants. %

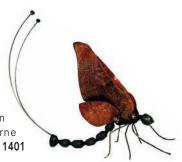
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Copper accent

The forged steel and copper Mayfly is one of the many handmade creations in this line of garden sculptures. The Mayfly comes in three sizes from 24 to 42 inches. Blackthorne Forge. (802) 426-3369. Write in 1401



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Flower Lights are intended for the home, patio or landscape. They are available in an array of colors. Available materials include copper, offwhite petals and multi-colored, airbrushed petals. H&H Manufacturing, Inc. (256) 357-4125. Write in 1425



Garden plaque

Heavenly Garden plaque is one of the designs in the new Expressions Collection by sculptor George Carruth. Carruth designs are hand cast in stone and made in the United States. The plaque is intended to be weatherproof and is available with a lifetime guarantee. Carruth Studio. (800) 225-1178. Write in 1402



Wall plaque

The Gate Wall Plaque is made of wrought iron and hand-painted in an antique finish. It measures 43 inches tall and 25½ inches wide and can be displayed indoors or out. A variety of styles is available. Jacaman Gift Co., Inc. (800) 275-3316. Write in 1413



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These metal stars are available in three colors: black, burgundy and rust. Three sizes are also available: 18, 28 and 36 inches. Veldsma & Sons, Inc. (800) 458-7919. Write in 1423



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These globes are available in a variety of styles, finishes and sizes. including 6, 10

and 12 inches, as well as 12-inch swirl and 12-inch pin optic. The complete line includes 22 styles and colors. Baker's Lawn Ornaments. (814) 445-7028. Write in 1400



Plant stand

Made in the United States, this plant stand is designed to hold five terra cotta pots so the steel structure is invisible to the eye. The stand measures 46 inches tall and has a powdercoated finish. Friendship's Garden, Inc. (800) 682-9272. Write in 1406