

Episode 128 show notes and advice

Episode description

This week, Sarah discusses urban gardening and the age-old question, 'Why women grow?' with journalist and novelist, Alice Vincent. Alice brings a hands-on approach to gardening, inspired by years of sowing and growing through trial and error on balconies in South London. Here, the pair share their top plants for balconies and beyond.

In this episode, discover:

- A look into Alice's brand-new book 'Why Women Grow?'
- Top choices for shady balconies

episode 128 advice sheet

Inspired by one of Alice's earlier books, Sarah bought 'How to Grow Stuff: Easy, no-stress gardening for beginners' for one of her daughters, which she found clearly and easily explained propagation.

Alice says she started her career as a journalist covering music and the arts, but her journey into gardening truly when she moved to South London and had a balcony of her own. It was here where she would experiment with gardening, inspired by a 'give it a go' approach.

Alice started writing a column for The Telegraph inspired by the new things she was learning about gardening, which ultimately formed the foundation of Alice's debut novel 'Root Bound' – which explores the notion of what happens when people return to the earth through times of social turmoil.

Balcony gardens (7:45)

Alice explains that she had two balcony gardens, the first which she lost during the writing of 'Root Bound', and the second which she has taken on by the end of the book.

The first balcony, was totally pest-free, sunny, but small, was good for growing tomatoes.

The second was next to a protected and ancient piece of woodland and a golf course, which Alice totally fell for, but was incredibly shady and besieged by pigeons and squirrels on a regular basis.

This ignited Alice's interest in growing ferns, wood anemones, and foxgloves, which were highly textural and ultimately became the building blocks of the earth garden she has now. Alice says container gardening is a tremendous way to learn all about gardening as although limitations are in place, you also don't have to worry about a lot of the larger issues that gardeners usually experience. It also allows you to focus your mind and focus on the conditions too.

Alice also said it provided the opportunity to play around with height, levels, and structure as you only have so much room. She also says that the pots she planted up then she still has now, planted up at the back of her house. High-tolerance and easy going, Alice says she had to water by hand.

Alice's favourite plants for small scale gardening and shade (11:00)

Ferns (Dryopteris)

Great for dry shade and containers, this is a must-have balcony plant for Alice. Alice explains that often balconies provide rain shelter from the roof above, so you must accommodate the rain shadow.

Muehlenbeckia

A pretty deciduous shrub with small green leaves, which can be grown as a climber or can also offer ground cover. Alice says that this plant can be a thug if you don't constrain it.

Fatsia Japonica

Alice explains that she still has some of these plants in containers now, and in containers can provide essential structure and can also look like house plants with big, structured leaves.

Dark purple tulips

Alice grew a particular type of dark purple tulip on her balconies, which flower late in the season. They are quite tall and great for adding drama. Alice finds that dark colours often work well in this context because the balcony is so small. Try to avoid whites and gaudy colours, as you need a lot of it to make an impact.

Nicotiana sylvestris grandiflora

An absolute favourite of Sarah's. During lockdown, Alice grew these from seed. Bright green and highly scented, plants like these work well for balconies as it's such a small space, so the fragrance engulfs you.

Why Women Grow (13:45)

Alice embarked on a journey to speak with women across the UK and into Europe about why they choose to grow and what it means to them. Sarah also says that this is an excellent example of research, pulling on a wide net of experience.

Alice says she initially felt pressure when trying to come up with a concept for her second book but struck upon the idea of investigating why people garden, particularly in times of lockdown. Alice started the process by writing a physical list of woman whose work she enjoyed, including those on Instagram.

Using a survey to collect information, Alice began with the key question, 'what drew you to gardening?' The answers she received were so varied and compelling this helped her to carve out a distinct path for her novel inspired by the stories of the women she encountered.

Alice's selected works

Alice's brand-new book 'Why Women Grow' is available now from all good bookstores.

Discover more of Alice's titles:

- How to Grow Stuff: Easy, no-stress gardening for beginners
- Rootbound: Rewilding a Life
- Why Women Grow: Stories of Soil, Sisterhood and Survival

Don't forget to check out Alice's podcast, available on all good streaming sights. Alice chats with a variety of guests, including Sarah, about the joy and importance of gardening.