

YORK COUNTY

It's a morning meant for party-style shopping at Liz Bly's home in York County.

About 15 friends and neighbors sit on folding chairs and sofas, catalogs in hand, pencils poised to write notes — maybe fill in an order form.

The women are not looking for stylish food storage containers or fancy cookware. Instead, they are there to learn how to use a "soil blocker" to get their garden seeds off to a good start.

Lisa Ziegler stands in front of them to explain and demonstrate the efficient and easy use of several little-known gardening tools and products. For instance, there's the dibble, a T-shaped aluminum planting hand tool that's perfect for small bulbs such as crocus, she says. There's also a multi-use trowel that digs planting holes, removes weeds and smoothes soil.

She also peppers her program with educational tidbits. She advises the women to consult their local Virginia Cooperative Extension office when they have plant questions, and encourages them to adopt gardening habits that benefit the environment and health of the Chesapeake Bay.

"This is 'edu-tainment,'" she tells the women at Bly's gathering. "Whether you buy or not, you take something away from this workshop."

She started The Gardener's Workshop home parties in 2006, and conducts them with the help of trained "garden steward consultants" who earn commission, bonuses and rebates based on sales. Hostesses earn free and discounted products according to workshop sales. Family members Sara Mason and Suzanne Frye help Ziegler with business needs, such as product photography and catalog layout.

Her plant and tool background comes from years of trials and tribulations in her own garden. Before launching the home gardening parties, she operated Ziegler Garden, a fresh-cut floral business from her yard in the Denbigh area of Newport News. She grew everything — larkspur, cosmos, poppies, snapdragons and zinnias — from seed and supplied stems and bouquets of flowers to local florists and customers at the Williamsburg Farmers' Market.

During that time, she experimented with all types of seed-starting methods. Many failed miserably. Finally, she discovered what English gardeners have used for centuries — soil blockers that are plastic forms you insert and wiggle around in a tray of wet soil. Seeds are dropped into each wedge of soil where they germinate into transplants ready for the garden. Ziegler says she's used soil blockers to start 75,000 seedlings without any "damping-off," a common fungal disease that attacks seedlings, weakening the stems at the soil level.

"A soil-blocked seed will fruit and flower two to three weeks earlier than a seed germinated any other way," she explains to women at the party.

Soil-blocking kits for \$77.95 and flower, vegetable and herb seed packets for \$3.25 each are the mainstays of her 50-page catalog. Seasonal products such as living wreath kits, down-under pots (a decorative pot where the plant hangs downward), compost bins, organic fertilizers, recycled rubber tubs and sensible tools keep joining the collection. She tests everything she sells — ruthlessly, she says.

"These rain gel granules with no sodium keep containers from drying out so quickly," she says. "I know because I used them in haystacks next to a windy pasture and watered only twice a week."



A dibble, an aluminum tool used to plant small bulbs and transplants, is passed around so party-goers can get a feel for its quality.



Lynda Sabochick discusses her order with Lisa Ziegler.



Demonstrations include the use of a soil-blocking kit for starting seeds.

Her favorite implements include a razor hoe, which features a thin but sharp 7-inch blade that cuts weeds just below the surface, and a regular garden hoe. Each costs \$52.

"Hoing has gotten a bad, bad rap for a long time," she tells the group while she shows how hoeing should be done. "You're supposed to stand up to hoe, not stoop."

She laughs when she holds up the easy-read rain gauge for \$19.50.

"When we joined the 40-something age at our house, we found a rain gauge you can read from more than 30 feet away," she says.

When she passes the gloves to women at the party, murmurs of approval come from everyone who slips one on their hands. The \$9.95 Atlas gloves, with their rubberized coating on the palms and fingertips and breathable knit on the tops, are among her

top-selling items.

"The gloves are so good, I got them for my mother who loves to garden," says Lynda Sabochick at the party.

"Yes, they are great," says Melinda Geskey. "You can feel everything. They are very tactile, like your bare hand."

After Ziegler finishes going through the catalog, she invites the women to come up and test the soil-blocking kit she has on display — complete with wet soil. She also gives away a big bouquet of garden-grown flowers.

Bly invites her guests to enjoy snacks she's put out on the island in her kitchen, and Ziegler begins to take orders.

Michele Grossenbaugh wants a \$33.50 down-under pot. Becky Wallace picks the \$15 Lemon Lime Joy Collection of seeds, which includes pink zinnias in two sizes mixed with lime-green zinnias and lemon-scented basil.

Geskey says she's thinking about becoming a garden steward.

"Every product I've tried, I've loved," she says. ■

Garden workshops facts

What is it? Home garden party called The Gardener's Workshop

Who gives them? Hostesses have day or evening events in their homes — similar to Tupperware and Pampered Chef parties.

What takes place? A 30- to 45-minute "edutainment" gardening party features tips about planting seeds and establishing seedlings, tool demonstrations, light snacks and door prizes.

Who's invited? Friends, families and neighbors. "Couples" workshops are popular.

Who conducts the party? A trained "garden steward consultant" conducts each workshop. Stewards don't have to be experienced gardeners; they earn commission, bonuses and rebates based on sales. Learn how to be a garden steward during an information night with Lisa Ziegler, creator of The Gardener's Workshop, at 6 p.m. Aug. 10 at her garden in Newport News. Garden stewards will soon have their own homepages and online shopping sites.

How do you schedule a party? Contact The Gardener's Workshop of Newport News at 877-7159 or visit www.thegardenersworkshop.com.



Friends and neighbors gather in Liz Bly's home in York County and listen while Lisa Ziegler, standing, shares gardening tips and product information during The Gardener's Workshop, a gardening-themed party similar to Tupperware and Pampered Chef. PHOTOS BY JOE FUDGE/DAILY PRESS

You're invited to a party

*Forget Pampered Chef and Tupperware,
the Gardener's Workshop is growing in popularity*