

Catch Word #82 – Garden-variety

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone. It's Maura.

Harp: And Harp.

Maura: And we're back with your Culips ESL podcast.

Harp: Make sure you go to our website, Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com, 'cause there you can become a member and have access to all the extra material; complete transcript, a detailed explanation, and even a quiz.

Maura: Yes. And today we are going to do a Catch Word episode for you. And in our Catch Word episodes, we look at popular idioms and expressions. We give you synonyms, lots of explanations, and examples of how you can use these fun expressions.

Harp: Exactly.

Maura: So today, we're going to talk about expressions that you can use to talk about something that is average and normal.

Harp: Yeah. So today's theme is where we talk about expressions to explain something that is ordinary, normal, something common, something that is not special, not different, not exciting, that you can find everywhere.

Maura: Yeah, nothing special or exciting, just plain, ordinary things. So our first expression is ***garden-variety***.

Harp: ***Garden-variety***.

Maura: Yeah. It's two words—*garden* and *variety*—put together with a dash or hyphen. So, you can say something is ***garden-variety***.

Harp: Yeah. So when something is ***garden-variety***, that means it's average. There's nothing special about it.

Maura: Exactly. So, the possible origin of this expression is connected with plants. You might have already guessed that from the name, *garden*, right? So, ***garden-variety*** plants are plants that are not rare, not special plants.

Harp: Yeah, they're plants you can find in any store that sells plants.

- Maura: Right. So, this expression probably started when people were talking about plants and calling regular plants that you see in many stores **garden-variety**.
- Harp: Yeah. So if you have to look for a special type of plant that's hard to find, it's not **garden-variety**.
- Maura: No. It's special, it's rare, and it's probably expensive.
- Harp: Probably.
- Maura: So, we first started using it to talk about plants and now we use this expression, **garden-variety**, to talk about, really, anything that is average or normal.
- Harp: Exactly. Should we give an example?
- Maura: Yes.
- Harp: So I just got a new DVD player.
- Maura: Oh, really? Is it a **Blu-ray**?
- Harp: No, it's just your **garden-variety** DVD player.
- Maura: Oh. But, you know, why spend more money if it works just fine?
- Harp: Exactly. It'll be good enough.
- Maura: So, in that example, you didn't have a new, fancy, high-tech DVD player. You just had a regular one.
- Harp: Yeah. Something normal, average.
- Maura: Yeah. So you used the expression **garden-variety** to mean that it wasn't **the latest** model.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: Now, you can use **garden-variety** to talk about all kinds of things. You could use it to talk about items you bought, like a DVD player, or you could use it to talk about clothes. You could also use it to talk about places. So let's give an example talking about places.

- Harp: Sounds good. Hey Claudia.
- Maura: Hey.
- Harp: How are you?
- Maura: Oh, good, good. A little tired 'cause, you know, my friend's been visiting.
- Harp: Oh yeah. She was in town yesterday.
- Maura: Yup. She just left this morning.
- Harp: Did you do anything special last night?
- Maura: Yeah, we went walking around downtown, and we saw a movie, and before that we went to get something to eat.
- Harp: Oh, did you go to a nice, special, restaurant?
- Maura: Actually, we ended up just going to, you know, your **garden-variety** hamburger joint. It was OK, but nothing special.
- Harp: OK, sounds like a fun night still.
- Maura: Yeah, it was good. So, in that example, I went out to eat at a regular restaurant. I had hamburgers, french fries. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't amazing, **nothing to write home about**. Now, saying that something is **garden-variety** is just one way that you can say something is average or mediocre. So, Harp, what's another way that we can say something is just average?
- Harp: Another way is to say **run-of-the-mill**.
- Maura: Yeah, so this is four words all stuck together, and we use it as an adjective too, to say that something is **run-of-the-mill**.
- Harp: Yeah, **run-of-the-mill**.
- Maura: Yeah, 'cause we never say it that slowly and that carefully. We say it quickly. Harp, you say it, 'cause you speak fast.
- Harp: **Run-of-the-mill**.
- Maura: Yeah, the *of* sounds like *ah*—*run-ah-the-mill*. And this is just like **garden-variety**. It means that something is normal, commonplace, not special,

something that you see or experience all the time. Now, where would an expression like this come from, **run-of-the-mill**? It's so strange.

Harp: Well, the expression **run-of-the-mill** is connected to clothing, because **run-of-the-mill** clothing was regular clothing that came from a factory and was not special, it was not hand-made or, it was just normal, **run-of-the-mill** clothes.

Maura: Uh-huh, right. Because *mill* is like an old-fashioned word for *factory*. So, the clothes that came from this mill, or factory, were normal, average. Lots of people had them, so they weren't special. And then we started using this expression to talk about **anything and everything** that was average and normal.

Harp: Exactly.

Maura: So, let's give some more examples with this expression, **run-of-the-mill**. So, what did you do last night?

Harp: I went to see a movie.

Maura: Oh yeah? How was it?

Harp: It was OK. It was your **run-of-the-mill** romantic comedy.

Maura: Oh yeah.

Harp: Yeah. **Boy meets girl**, they fall in love, there's a problem, then they live **happily ever after**.

Maura: Yup, I've seen that before.

Harp: Me too. Many times.

Maura: Great. So in that example, you saw a movie. It wasn't special. You've seen a movie with a plot like that many times before, so you could say it was **run-of-the-mill**.

Harp: Exactly. There was nothing exciting or different or unique about it.

Maura: Now, there is a way to use this expression to talk about the inverse or the opposite. You can say something is **not run-of-the-mill** and then it means that it is special. So, if you say something is **not run-of-the-mill** or **not garden-variety**, it means that it was exciting, new, and different.

- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: So let's give an example in the negative, saying something is *not run-of-the-mill*.
- Harp: OK, let's do it.
- Maura: I'm taking a class two nights a week. It's so busy.
- Harp: Wow, that's really busy. You're working and you're taking class two nights a week?
- Maura: Yeah, it is busy, but the teacher is really, really great. She totally helps us out and is always staying behind to help us with our homework. She's not your **run-of-the-mill** teacher.
- Harp: Wow, she sounds great.
- Maura: Yeah, her lessons are really exciting too. It's a good class, but I'm tired.
- Harp: I imagine.
- Maura: So there's an example of how you can flip this expression around, use it with a negative to describe something that is new and exciting.
- Harp: Exactly. Something that is different and great.
- Maura: And we have one more expression for you.
- Harp: This one's my favourite expression of the **bunch**.
- Maura: What is it?
- Harp: **A dime a dozen**.
- Maura: **A dime a dozen**. So let's explain this expression in two parts. First, you have *a dime*.
- Harp: Yeah. A dime is 10 cents.
- Maura: Right, 10 cents. And then a dozen is ... ?
- Harp: Twelve of something.
- Maura: Yeah, so, 12 is a dozen and a dime is 10 cents. This expression means,

literally, that you can buy 12 of an item for only 10 cents, which is very cheap.

Harp: Very cheap. And I think it might be impossible now, in Canada.

Maura: I think you're right. I can't think of anything that you can buy a dozen of for 10 cents.

Harp: I can't think of anything.

Maura: So this expression means that something is not special, and very normal, just like the other expressions. Because it's so cheap, you see them everywhere, and they're just average.

Harp: Exactly.

Maura: But this expression is a little bit different, because it can also mean, like we already said, that something is cheap or inexpensive.

Harp: Yeah. So when something is **a dime a dozen**, it means that it's cheap, it's not expensive. For example, if there's a type of shoe that everyone's wearing, but you know that they're cheap, you could say that those shoes are **a dime a dozen**.

Maura: Right. You see them everywhere. It's normal to see lots of people wearing them and a lot of people have them because they're not expensive. So, let's give a dialogue example with **a dime a dozen**.

Harp: OK, let's do it.

Maura: So, you're in Toronto just for today. What do you wanna do?

Harp: I don't know. I think we should just walk around.

Maura: Yeah, it's nice. We'll just shop, see the sites, grab something to eat.

Harp: Yeah, I'm a bit hungry.

Maura: OK, well, is there anything you want to eat?

Harp: I'm really craving a hot dog.

Maura: Well, you're lucky. Hot dog stands are **a dime a dozen** here.

Harp: I know. That's why I love Toronto.

- Maura: So, we'll just keep walking and I'm sure we'll see one soon.
- Harp: Good, 'cause I'm hungry.
- Maura: Great. So, in that example, hot dog stands were everywhere, so we said they were **a dime a dozen**.
- Harp: Yes, which is true. And we set up this example in Toronto because there are so many hot dog stands in Toronto.
- Maura: It's really true. And you can smell the barbecue everywhere and it gets you hungry. And unfortunately, in Montreal, we don't have hot dog vendors, because it's bizarrely illegal.
- Harp: I know ... but we have 99-cent pizza slices.
- Maura: Yes. The pizza places around here are **a dime a dozen** but not the **street meat**, as it's called.
- Harp: We have to go to Toronto for hot dogs.
- Maura: We do. Now, there's one last thing I want to remind everybody about, which is that we can say ***garden-variety*** and ***run-of-the-mill*** in the negative, to mean something is very exciting and new, but you can't use this last expression, ***a dime a dozen***, in the negative. It doesn't work. It's not logical, and it can only mean that something is average, normal, and inexpensive.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: So, if you want to learn more about this episode or our past episodes, or if you wanna learn more about me and Harp, you can come to the Culips website.
- Harp: Yes. And you can donate to help us keep making these wonderful, fantastic podcasts for you.
- Maura: Yes. We appreciate your help and we also appreciate hearing from you, so leave a comment or send us an email.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: And we will talk to you next time, then.
- Harp: Bye everyone!
- Maura: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Garden-variety

When something is described as **garden-variety**, it means that the thing is common and average, not special or rare. As we say in this episode, this likely started because **garden-variety** plants are common, inexpensive, and easy to find in any plant store. Now we can say anything is **garden-variety**.

We can say something *is* **garden-variety**, but you might also hear someone say *your* **garden-variety**. Adding *your* to **garden-variety** is how this expression is often used, but it doesn't change the meaning in any way. We even say *your* **garden-variety** a couple of times in this episode.

Here's an example with *your* **garden-variety**:

Matthew: What kind of used car are you looking to buy?

Marc: Nothing special, just your **garden-variety** compact car. I just want a good price!

Also, remember that by using this expression in the negative, you can describe something that is special and rare.

Here is an example with *not your* **garden-variety**:

Dean: That's not your **garden-variety** cat. Look at the colours on its face!

Naomi: You're right. I've never seen a cat like that before.

Blu-ray

Blu-ray discs look very similar to DVDs but supposedly they display a better quality picture when you are watching a film. **Blu-ray** discs and the **Blu-ray** player have come onto the market in the past 10 years. If you go to a video store in Canada, you will often see some films on **Blu-ray** or even a whole section for **Blu-ray** discs.

Blu-ray is not a technology that has become very popular in Canada. Most people still have your garden-variety DVD players.

The latest

When something is described as **the latest**, it means that it's the newest, most recent version. **The latest** movies are the movies that have just recently be released in theatres. **The latest** technology is the newest form of technology.

Nothing to write home about

Here is an expression that means something is not special or interesting. If someone says an experience was **nothing to write home about**, that means that the experience was not particularly interesting, or that there is nothing much to say about it.

If you imagine being away from home and doing something exciting, then you might also imagine wanting to tell your family about the experience, which could be done by writing a letter home. If something that you do doesn't make you want to write home to your family, it must be because it wasn't very exciting or interesting.

Of course, now this expression can be used at any time to mean that something is not special or interesting. You don't need to be in a different place or to actually write letters to your family to use this expression! In this episode, Maura says that the restaurant she visited was OK, but **nothing to write home about**.

This expression is a bit different from describing something as garden-variety or common. When something is garden-variety, it's average, but if you say that something was **nothing to write home about**, that means it is unexciting and not worth talking about.

Here are some examples with **nothing to write home about**:

Ron: How was the play last night?

Oliver: It was pretty good, but **nothing to write home about**.

Lou Ann: Do you think we should go to the park downtown?

Paula: I'd rather go to the one near my house. The park downtown is **nothing to write home about**. There aren't even many benches to sit on!

This expression cannot be used as a question or in a positive way. It is always used in the negative form to describe something that's not special.

Run-of-the-mill

This expression, **run-of-the-mill**, has the same meaning as *garden-variety*, used to describe things that are average and common. *Run* in this expression means the amount of something made in a certain time period, so if many of something are made in a certain period, that means the item is common and not special. *Mill* is an older word that means *factory*.

Just like *garden-variety*, this expression can be used in the negative to describe something that's unique and special. Here are a couple of examples:

Ben: Hey, I kinda like this coat. Do you think I should buy it?

Shannon: What's special about it? It just looks like your **run-of-the-mill** trench coat.

Justina: I want to show you this new doughnut shop. The doughnuts are so good. They're not just your **run-of-the-mill** doughnuts.

Neil: I can't wait to try them.

Anything and everything

Sometimes we have expressions that are easy to understand because they mean exactly what they say. This expression is one of those! To say **anything and everything** means everything! Saying **anything and everything** stresses and emphasizes the idea of everything.

Here are a couple of examples with **anything and everything**:

Miranda: We're almost done packing. What do you want me to put in the box from this room?

Carl: **Anything and everything!** I need to take it all.

Fred: How do you like that new book you're reading?

Elaine: It's great. It really clarifies **anything and everything** you've ever wondered about grammar.

Boy meets girl

This is a classic line used when describing a love story, most often when referring to movies. Love stories often begin when the two future lovers meet, which is commonly described as **boy meets girl**.

Here's another example of **boy meets girl** being used:

Monica: So how does your story start?

Rachel: Well, first **boy meets girl**, and then there's a zombie attack.

Happily ever after

This is a classic line used in stories with a happy ending, especially children's stories and fairy tales. *And they lived happily ever after* is actually the classic way to end a fairy tale. This ending means that everyone in the story, or at least the main characters, continues to live very happily after the story ends.

Here's another example using this line:

Teresa: Then the bad guy runs away and the rest of them live **happily ever after**. It was a good movie.

Steve: Maybe I'll go see it this weekend.

The classic way to begin a fairy tale is *once upon a time*.

A bunch

A bunch is an informal group of people or things. There could be **a bunch** of people standing together or you could buy **a bunch** of bananas. Harp says that the expression *a dime a dozen* is her favourite of the **bunch** of expressions discussed in this episode.

Here's an example with **a bunch**:

Dina: Do you know anyone in your class?

Luke: Yeah, I've already got **a bunch** of friends.

A dime a dozen

The last expression used to describe something plain and average in this episode is **a dime a dozen**. This expression can also mean that something is cheap or not expensive.

A dime a dozen is used a little differently than *garden-variety* and *run-of-the-mill*. You cannot use **a dime a dozen** before the noun. Here's a comparison:

You can say, for example:

Those are **run-of-the-mill** shirts.

Those shirts are **run-of-the-mill**.

Those are garden-variety shirts.

Those shirts are garden-variety.

But you can only say:

Those shirts are **a dime a dozen**.

This expression is also different from *run-of-the-mill* and *garden-variety* because it's usually not used in a negative form.

Here's one more example with **a dime a dozen**:

Thomas: I see those cars everywhere!

Katrina: I know. They really are **a dime a dozen**.

Whaddya wanna

Here's a great example of casual spoken North American English. *What do you want to* should never be written as **whaddya wanna** in formal writing. You might see it written like this when people are casually emailing or texting, but it's generally not considered proper and it's definitely unprofessional. But when we speak, this is often what we sound like when we say *what do you want to*. Listen again to this episode to hear how Maura pronounces it.

Street meat

In countries all over the world, food is sold on the side of the road or on the street. In many cities in Canada, we have different versions of this too. In most big cities in Canada, there are hot dog or sausage vendors on the sidewalks, so that any hungry person can easily buy something to eat. Because you buy the meat (the hot dogs) on the street, the slang term is **street meat**.

In Toronto, there are a lot of vendors on the street and they are very popular, which is why we set our dialogue example there. In Montreal, selling **street meat** is not permitted, so we don't have any street vendors, which is too bad!

Quiz

1. That's not your garden-variety kitchen table.

Which of the following CANNOT replace *garden-variety* in this example?

- a) average
- b) common
- c) run-of-the-mill
- d) a dime a dozen

2. Something is not special if it is _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) something to write home about
- b) nothing to write home about
- c) a letter home
- d) not run-of-the-mill

3. Ryan: It's not your run-of-the-mill hot chocolate.

What is Ryan definitely saying about the hot chocolate?

- a) It is average and common.
- b) It is special and unique.
- c) It is delicious.
- d) It is disgusting.

4. What is the classic ending to a children's story or fairy tale?

- a) And they lived happily ever after.
- b) And their lives continued happily.
- c) And they were happy forever.
- d) And forever they were happy.

5. Which of the following could be called a bunch?

- a) one person standing outside a restaurant
- b) a pile of clothes on the floor
- c) a cow in a field
- d) a magazine

6. Which of the following is an INCORRECT way to use the expression *a dime a dozen*?

- a) Those chocolate bars are a dime a dozen.
- b) A boy like that is a dime a dozen.
- c) Those are a dime a dozen milkshakes.
- d) I would say those bikes are a dime a dozen because I see them everywhere.

7. What does *whaddya wanna* mean?

- a) what you want
- b) what do you want
- c) what did you want
- d) what do you want to

8. What is street meat?

- a) meat sandwiches that are famous in Montreal
- b) sausages you can buy from vendors on city streets
- c) Delis that are located close to streets
- d) Vegetarian sausages

Answers: 1.d 2.b 3.b 4.a 5.b 6.c 7.d 8.b