

Garden Planning 2016

With the start of the New Year come many resolutions. We all start out with high expectations, and then life gets in the way and we often go back to our old routines. There are many new gardeners out there who want to start a garden this year. The failure or success does depend some on the weather, but good planning can make a huge difference between success and failure. While we all enjoy spending time outdoors in the late winter or spring with mild temperatures, that acre garden that sounded like a great idea in March, may not be as exciting when July rolls around and you still have to be out there maintaining what you planted. Starting small and building on success is a good idea.

Whether you are planting vegetables, flowers, fruit bushes or shrubs, knowing something about the needs of what you are growing will help you determine what and where to plant. All fruits and vegetables need a minimum of 6-8 hours of sunlight, and would prefer even more, so monitor your sunlight. If you have deciduous trees, realize you have more light in the winter than you will have in the summer when they are full of leaves. Roots from large trees can also compete for water and nutrients. If your yard is predominately shade, you have many options for shrubs, perennials, groundcovers and annuals, but you won't be successful with fruits, vegetables and turf grass.

Check the drainage of your soil. Unless you are putting in a bog or water garden, most plants prefer a well-drained soil. Standing water on the surface is a sure sign that you have issues, but that is not the only drainage problem. To test the internal drainage (where the roots will live), dig a hole in the soil approximately the depth you would be planting and fill it with water until the water stands. Then see how long it takes to drain. In a well-drained soil the water should go down about an inch per hour. If it goes down in seconds, you may have a really sandy soil and it would be hard to retain moisture. If there is still water standing in the hole the next day, you have poor drainage. Every time we get into heavy rains, your plants are swimming. Wet feet can kill many plants. If you have drainage problems, solve the problem before you plant. Solving may be as simple as building a raised bed, changing the slope of the land, or more elaborate like putting in French drains or larger drains.

Not only is drainage important to gardens, but the quality of your soil will determine overall plant health. The soil is the foundation to the garden. Many of us live with more rocks than soil, so amending or planting in raised beds is often an easy fix. Have your soil tested. Even if you have decent soil with few rocks, we often lack organic matter. Know what the pH of your soil is. Most plants need a slightly acidic soil around 6-6.5, but some plants need a strongly acidic soil such as azaleas, blueberries and camellias. Soil testing is an easy way to know what you have before you plant. Go several places in the area you plan to plant in and take a slice of soil from each area. Mix the soil together and take in one pint of soil to your local county extension office—we have an office in every county in Arkansas. You can take a separate sample from a vegetable garden, lawn, shrubbery beds, etc., but don't take 10 different samples from the same spot. Once the samples get sent in, you will receive a computer report in a couple of weeks telling you about your soil conditions and giving you recommendations if you need to lime the soil (if your pH is too low) or add sulfur if the pH is too high. It will also give you a generic fertilizer recommendation.

Once you have determined what type of garden you will be planting, then comes the fun part of choosing plants. If it is a vegetable garden, what does your family enjoy eating? We have both cool season vegetables and warm season vegetables. You can grow both, but at different times. Cool season vegetables are planted from February through mid-April and again in late summer through early fall for a winter garden. Warm season plants start growing after frost chances are gone. We start in mid-April and can continue planting throughout the summer. Make sure you allow ample room for your plants to grow, so spacing is important. If you plant seeds too thickly, thin them out once they come up and have their second set of leaves. We all sometimes get a bit heavy-handed, but if left too thick, they will compete with each other and you won't get a quality product. Read your seed packet, and it will give you some great information on spacing, plus the length of time from seeding until harvest.

Plant taller growing vegetables to the north side of your garden and shorter vegetables to the south, otherwise the tall plants can shade the short ones. If space is a factor, consider growing vining vegetables like cucumbers and gourds on a trellis. Broadcast a general fertilizer before planting and then side dress with fertilizer throughout the season. Some vegetables like peppers and corn are heavy feeders, while green beans and peas don't need as much. If you are growing in containers or raised beds, you may need additional applications of fertilizer, since you will be watering more often and leaching out the nutrition.

Whether you are growing vegetables, fruit, or shrubs and flowers, plant spacing is important. For permanent plants in the garden, we need to think about mature size. They need to be planted far enough away from the foundation that they have room to grow on all four sides. While they can grow together to make a solid hedge, if they are planted too close to the house they only have room to grow to one side. Having a bit of space between the plants and the foundation of your house is a good way to insulate your house and is healthier for the plants. Think not just about width of the plant at maturity, but eventual height as well. Look up and see if there are power lines or the eave of your house. If you choose plants that at maturity will fit the space you have, maintenance can be reduced and your plants can reach their full potential.

Once planted, most plants will benefit from water during dry periods. Some plants are more water needy than others. So knowing something about the plants you are growing helps determine their care. Group plants together that need the same nutrition, water and care. Their root systems intermingle, and it is difficult to treat each plant differently when they are planted side by side. A cactus plant in a garden with azaleas is not a great idea, because one likes it dry while the other thrives in moist locations.

Mulch all your gardens. Mulch retains moisture, moderates soil temperatures and keeps the weeds at bay. In ornamental beds, we want the mulch to be attractive and not take away from our plants. Brown or black bark, leaves or pine needles work well. Avoid white rock and red mulch. We don't want the mulch to be the star of the garden.

Gardening is still the number one hobby in the US. Everyone can grow a plant, you just need to choose the right plant for the right spot. With a little planning, you can be a successful gardener.

Janet B. Carson
Extension Horticulture Specialist
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette