

Gardening Basics 101 - part 1- by Mark Gilliland

With the warming days and the sweet smells of Springtime dirt, the thoughts of many of us are turning to getting down-and-dirty! Whether you are a new-be, a would-be or a well-seasoned gardener, the following three part series covers a range of topics that will get your groggy winter brain cells thinking "green" again.

Pick the Right Plant for the Right Place

Every plant species has evolved within a range of environmental conditions – a niche – which, not surprisingly, is exactly the conditions allowing best growth and strongest health. Important factors include: light (sun to shade), soil moisture (dry, well drained, moist, boggy, aquatic), soil pH (acidity), exposure (wind, salt, urban conditions) and zone (winter hardiness).

When you go plant shopping at the nursery, you'll find a tag on each pot outlining the optimum range of environmental factors for that particular species. (Often, retail tags cover only a limited set of conditions such as LIGHT and ZONE. So, best do your homework by researching conditions or asking the nursery staff questions about particular plants before you purchase them.)

Don't forget to consider the growth habit of your plant – how high and wide will it mature to? (The tag generally indicates this information.) But just as important is to consider what plants will be surrounding or growing over your new plant in the bed? Think 3-D!

Of course, plant selection is also an aesthetic decision – bloom time & color; leaf size, shape, texture & color; seasonal interest (bark & berries); overall plant shape.

Know Your Soil

Soils are biological and nutrient factories which ensure good health and robust plant growth. A rich organic soil will be filled with microbes, fungi and beneficial insects. A poor soil will lack these, as well as lack good granular structure - preventing water retention and proper oxygenation of the root zone.

Soils in Westchester tend to be acidic, and are often a bit on the clay side. To help balance this sort of soil, adding rich, humusy compost is best. Build soil structure by applying 3"-4" of organic compost or well-rotted leaf mold (shredded, composted Fall leaves) as a top dress to existing beds.

Consider taking soil samples to the local Cornell Co-operative Extension office in Valhalla (phone: 914-285-4620) to get a full-spectrum soil test which will include micronutrient analysis. They can also recommend additional soil amendments, if required.

Preparing a New Bed

The old rules we heard when growing up are no longer valid: we were told to “double turn” the dirt in a new bed to a depth of 12”-18”. Wrong! This actually disrupts the soil’s eco-environment (disrupting biological activity and compressing oxygen out) and can quickly turn great soil into bad soil. (It also exposes years of built-up weed seeds to active growing conditions.)

Proper bed preparation in an area which is currently lawn is simple: “peel off” the top 3” or so of the turf (its root zone) and flip over so that the grass is now facing down and can begin to compost. Add organic amendments (e.g.: 3” rich compost) next, then loosely work this layer into the old by using a rake or fork to poke holes thru the layers. Wiggle the tongs back and forth – allowing some of the compost to fill the forked holes. A layer of newspaper – 6 or so sheets thick - laid down over the inverted sod before the compost has been added helps prevent weed seed growth and should bio-degrade in one season.

Don’t overwork the soil! Also, minimize walking on your new beds (especially when the soil is still very wet in the Spring). This prevents over-compaction which depletes the soil of oxygen and ruins the soil’s granular water-holding structure.

Final Tips:

Resources for help – There are numerous resources to get help with your gardening questions: ask your friendly neighborhood gardener, use Google to search the internet, contact your local Cornell Co-operative Extension, join a Garden Club, take Continuing Ed classes at the New York Botanical Gardens. Don’t forget about mail-order catalogs! Lee Valley Tools, for instance, has lots of great tools; its website also provides a free guide to easy-to-install low cost drip irrigation systems.

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