

Gardening Basics 101 - part 3 - by Mark Gilliland

Welcome to the final installment of my three part Garden Primer. Previously we covered understanding environmental factors in your garden and how they affect your plants, as well as detailing when and how to plant. Now that everything is in the ground, its time to sit back and admire your work. Not! Rather, its time learn how to properly care for your new green friends.

Watering!

When I am asked what is the single most important thing to do for a new planting, there is universally one answer: water, water, water! Even with native plants, succulents and other "drought tolerant" plants, proper watering the first season will ensure that the plant can settle in well and get its root growth underway sufficiently to handle variable water conditions in later years.

Watering requirements vary based upon the time of year, the temperature and of course, the amount of recent rainfall. Giving perennials 1"-2" of water a week is not uncommon. In the heat of August, more may be required. For shrubs and trees this will vary by size and type. Typically, 3-5 gallons a week for a shrub should be OK. A tree may require 2-3 times this amount!

Again, everything depends upon the heat and rainfall conditions – check the soil and observe the plants. If they look fine in the early morning but wilted by the early evening, they probably need water. But beware! The signs of over-watering (wilted, yellowing leaves) and those of under-watering (wilted, yellowing and browning leaves) are often confused. When in doubt, check the soil moistness around the plant.

Many plant diseases caused by fungus, bacteria or mildew can be traced in part to improper watering habits (in combination with lack of sufficient air flow). Limit overhead watering which keeps leaves and stems moist especially on humid days, and thus prone to infection. Rather, water from below, near or at ground level. Watering by soaker hose or drip irrigation is recommended. (Note that many irrigation systems are designed for lawn/turf watering, not garden watering. Typically, irrigation spray heads provide water in exactly the form you're trying to avoid – overhead sprays. Beware!)

Mulching

Reduce the incidence of weeds, slow water evaporation and help build a rich organically active soil through the application of a mulch. Typically, a 3"-4" layer of mulch is applied around the plants in a bed. Keep the mulch from smothering the crown of a perennial and pulled back away from contact with the trunk or stems of a tree or shrub. Organic mulch should be applied every year in the Spring or late Fall.

Mulch is available in various forms. Perennials prefer a rich organic mulch such as leaf mold (shredded, composted Fall leaves). Shrubs and trees can typically accept a more woody mulch such as pine bark chips. (Its a good idea to fertilize your shrubs and trees yearly if using a bark-based mulch as decay of this type of mulch reduces nitrogen in the soil.)

Deer

Sure deer look cute, but their voracious appetite can ruin a garden overnight! What to do?? The range of solutions include:

- Fence in your yard or garden area (fence at least 8' high).
- Use sprays (applied to the leaf & flower buds) and/or granular repellants (in the beds around the plants). Some recommended brands include *Deer Stopper* (spray) and *Deer Scram* (granules). Any effective repellant program requires refreshing the spray or granules in a timely manner based upon weather conditions and rate of plant growth. Read your labels!
- Plant deer resistant species.

This latter solution sounds good, but there's a catch: deer don't read the published lists. What one herd ignores in your village may be a delicacy nearby. Feeding habits vary by deer, by herd, by location, by season and by year. That said, here are some characteristics of plants that deer tend to avoid – soft furry leaves, especially if they are silvery such as Lambs Ear (*Stachys*), strongly aromatic leaves (such as Lavender and many herbs) and plants that are toxic (*Foxglove*, *Andromeda*). Sometimes thorns help deter, often not.

The best bet in selecting deer resistant materials is to look around your neighborhood to see what is being eaten and what is not. Also, ask your local garden center. They hear reports from many customers about current deer activity in your area.

A word to the wise: always apply deer repellant immediately to any newly planted materials. Deer are curious and will come immediately

to test the new salad bar offerings!

Final Tips:

Garden Maintenance - Research has shown that working in your garden on a regular basis is good for your health – proving benefits to your circulation, heart rate, flexibility, stress level reduction and more. But where to begin? How do you learn about weeding, watering, fertilization, disease detection, perennial division, dead-heading & cutting back, pruning and so forth?

First, talk with other gardeners! Every gardener I meet loves to share their knowledge. Then, ask questions at your garden center. Finally, do research online and by reading reference books. Here are three great books that can form the core of your garden library:

The Well-Tended Perennial Garden by Tracy Disabato-Aust (Timber Press)

Cass Turnbull's Guide To Pruning: What, When, Where & How To Prune For a More Beautiful Garden by Cass Turnbull (Sasquatch Books)

Landscape Plants for Eastern North America by Harrison L. Flint (Wiley)

Mark Gilliland is owner of Garden Artistry, a local landscape design firm. He is a Cornell Master Gardener and is certified in landscape design by the New York Botanical Garden.