

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

Taking the Stress Out of Gardening

May I state at the outset how grateful I am that Yolanda Ulrich has offered this space for what I hope will be a regular feature in this newspaper. As part of the Urban Horticulture Program of the Miami-Dade Extension Office, I have the responsibility for answering many of the thousands of calls received annually for assistance with gardening issues. This column should appear about every 4-5 weeks, and I intend to address a variety of gardening topics, concentrating on those areas that appear to be of most concern to Miami-Dade residents.

Whilst subsequent columns will each concentrate on a specific topic, this first article is devoted to discussing a more general state of affairs that I find most sad. From my years of dealing with Miami-Dade residents, it is quite clear that for all too many people, gardening is a source of stress. For such people the activity I refer to as gardening, is yard work - just some woe filled task on a level with taking out the garbage or unblocking the toilet. That is not the way it is supposed to be! Indeed, there are those who can think of nothing better than spending time in the yard, quite oblivious to the world around them. Hours pass by as if seconds, then comes the sudden realization that daylight is fading and you still have roses to prune, orchids to divide or cuttings to pot. On a number of occasions I have returned calls to such people, only to hear a message that if they are unable to pick up the telephone, it is probably because they are busy in the yard.

For this first column I thought it would be useful to discuss a number of approaches to lessening the stress when it comes to gardening: irksome chore for some, an uplifting almost spiritual experience for others. With a little basic fore thought it should be possible to lessen the stress and make time spent in the yard a far more pleasant and rewarding experience.

The first step is to decide how much time you, and any other willing members of the household, can devote to maintaining a yard. This in part is going to be determined by how much you love plants – don't decide to install a stunning landscape just because you want to impress the neighbors. In order to sustain the initial impression of your new landscape, you will either need to find (and pay) a dependable gardener, or devote a portion of each week to caring and nurturing the plants you have chosen. Unlike other home improvements, landscaping involves the use of living subjects that require regular care and attention. If you are about to install a new landscape, call your local County Cooperative Extension Office for assistance in choosing what to plant and how to plant it, for your particular location.

If you decide that your life style affords little time to take care of the yard, it is possible to choose plants that require a minimal amount of maintenance. This does not mean however that they can be totally ignored. You should take the time to at least walk around the yard once a week and inspect trees, shrubs and turf for potential signs of a

problem. For those who wish to minimize time spent in the yard, an extensive list of low maintenance landscape plants suitable for South Florida is available from the Miami-Dade Extension Office (download from our local office website at <http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/publications.htm> or call 305 248 3311). You can also contact the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program at the above number (Ext. 245).

You may be willing to spend time in the yard, even become enthused about a special project (i.e. vegetable, butterfly or aquatic garden) or interested in growing a particular group of plants such as roses, hibiscus or gardenias. However before committing time, energy and money, make the effort to first find out what is involved. For instance if you are new to South Florida, a vegetable garden is planted in the fall since our summers are too hot and wet for most “cool” climate vegetables. In addition, rather than contend with our oolitic limestone many people find it easier to use containers or raised beds when growing vegetables. If you are planting a butterfly garden, you should be choosing plants that will provide for larval (caterpillar) and adult (butterfly) insects. Shrubs such as roses and gardenias need to be grafted on to the correct rootstock, otherwise they will decline within 2-3 years. (It is possible to grow some “old fashioned” roses on their own roots in South Dade, and this will be the subject of a future column).

One feature common to South Florida yards is turf, and this is probably the leading cause of garden stress based on the enquiries I receive. This is particularly true for those who want an emerald green expanse consisting of a single grass cultivar – let not a single broadleaf plant trespass! Life will be much easier if you are willing to put up with a few weeds, and grass that is a lighter shade of green. Often efforts to rid turf of weeds through the use of herbicide only lead to new problems, either damaged grass or serious damage to trees and shrubs in the landscape. Some weed problems, such as nutgrass and dollar weed, can be prevented by not over watering. Other weeds that prefer drier conditions can appear during winter and spring in bare patches caused by disease or lawn pests. Such diseases may well be a consequence of over watering, and are exacerbated by applying high levels of nitrogen fertilizer. Heavily fertilized turf can also encourage pests such as chinch bug and the need to use yet more pesticides. One excellent investment that can help reduce the amount of fertilizer is a mulching mower, engineered to chop up cut grass blades into fine particles that can then rapidly breakdown and return nutrients to the soil.

Some people are perturbed that grass has a tendency to thin out under trees. This is normal, and as shade increases beyond 40 – 50% it becomes more and more difficult for any turf grass to grow. The solution is to find a shade tolerant ground cover possibly in combination with the use of mulch. Applying more fertilizer or water will not help; indeed it will only make matters worse.

Over-watering in general is a common source of problems with plants, particularly container grown plants, bedding plants such as impatiens, and vegetables. Too much water can encourage plant diseases, some of which cause wilting and the application of yet more water which only exacerbates the problem and leads to further frustration.

Trees are another leading cause of stress, more specifically newly planted trees that fail to thrive and older trees that become a nuisance. When installing a tree realize that with increasing size there is more risk of a tree not establishing itself in the landscape. A smaller sized tree will be easier to set in the planting hole and suffer less from transplant shock. Never use black dirt as back fill, but as far as possible use the material that came out of the planting hole.

Before ever planting a tree, consider what it will look like in your landscape as it matures. Apart from shading out grass, which was mentioned above, how will the tree you have chosen affect other smaller trees and shrubs in the landscape? Will the canopy interfere with power lines, or develop limbs that directly overhang the roof of your house. More importantly, could the root system eventually damage sewer lines, swimming pools or even house foundations, not only on your property but neighboring lots. I have received frantic calls from people facing these problems, and usually the only option is to remove the tree. Often this involves older people on fixed incomes who can ill afford the expense. A tree that promised some beneficial shade when they first moved on to the property has over the years developed into a major liability. Many people are under the misapprehension that city or county government will remove nuisance trees. Local government responsibility is limited to the trees they plant.

Earlier I mentioned the problems that can result from the careless use of herbicide, and this can be extended to include pesticides and fertilizers. Misuse of fertilizers can cause root damage or induce nutritional imbalances. At the first sign of spots or blotches or discolored leaves many will spray with a pesticide not realizing that the problem is nutritional. If you know for certain that damage is due to a pest, decide if you can live with a few chewed or stippled leaves, given that the pest may not seriously threaten the plant. All pesticides, including seemingly benign formulations such as soap, can be potentially injurious to plants. Before spraying make sure the product is appropriate for the problem; at a minimum read the entire label. When it comes to using pesticides, and to a lesser extent fertilizers, the oft-repeated adage "first do no harm" should be your guiding principle.

It has only been possible to give you a sampling of some of the more common sources of garden stress. For all of us, our time in the yard can be more pleasurable and even rewarding if we take the time to first do a little "homework". The Extension Office has received numerous enquiries from Miami-Dade residents for informal classes on gardening. Call the Miami-Dade Extension Office (305 248 3311, then dial 0 for the operator) for further information. In my next article I will take a look at a couple of familiar low maintenance plants given a colorful new look by way of gardeners in Thailand.

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