

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

Taking the Stress Out of Gardening

For some there are few pursuits that prove as fulfilling as spending time gardening. Caught up in tending their plants they suddenly realize that with daylight fading, pruning the roses, dividing the orchids or potting up cuttings are tasks for another day. True, the heat and humidity of a Miami summer could temporarily damper the ardor of the less committed. For many though, irrespective of the time of year, gardening is yard work with the emphasis on work. Just some woe filled task on a level with taking out the garbage or unblocking the sink. Regardless of which of the above attitudes best describes your approach to gardening, irksome chore or a source of joy, gardening can be stressful. Below are some basic steps you can take to reduce the stress, be you a committed plant person or reluctant gardener.



If you are moving into a new home or renovating an existing landscape this is a good time to **decide how much time you can realistically devote to maintaining a yard**. For those with a passion for plants and gardening then it's clearly more than others who would rather be boating. If time is scarce consider carefully the wisdom of an elaborate new landscape. Think beyond how much it will improve the look of your property, to the ensuing maintenance involved. Unlike other home improvements, landscaping involves the use of living subjects that require regular care and attention. Are you prepared to search out and pay for the services of a knowledgeable and dependable gardener?



If your schedule permits little time to take care of the yard, one other option is to **choose plants that require a minimal amount of maintenance**. This does not mean however that they can be totally ignored. At the very least you should take a few minutes to walk around the yard at least once a week inspecting trees, shrubs and turf for potential signs of trouble.

If you plan to or already spend time in the yard, before embarking on some new project (i.e. vegetable, butterfly or aquatic garden) or growing a particular group of plants such as roses, hibiscus or gardenias, make the effort to first find out what is involved before committing time, energy and money. For instance, a butterfly garden requires a range of plants to satisfy the needs of both larval (caterpillar) and adult (butterfly). **Vegetable gardens** are becoming more popular in Miami-Dade. If you are new to South Florida, planting out is done in the fall since our summers are too hot and wet for most "cool" climate vegetables. In addition, rather than

contending with Miami limestone many find it easier to use containers or [raised beds](#) when growing vegetables.

If you are keen to complement your vegetable garden with a [few fruit trees](#) select from those that are more reliable in our local subtropical climate (e.g., mango, lychee and mamey) instead of trying to grow apples, plums and peaches. Citrus trees are available for planting in Miami-Dade but be aware of the problems; citrus canker is still with us, plus another more serious disease, [citrus greening](#). Before purchasing a citrus tree it is essential that you ensure it's grafted onto a rootstock suited to Miami-Dade soils otherwise the tree will never thrive. Some shrubs such as roses and gardenias also need to be grafted on the correct rootstock otherwise they will decline within 2-3 years. [Consider trying "old fashioned" roses](#), some of which do well on their own roots in Miami-Dade and are more drought-tolerant and disease resistant than most modern roses.



Turf grass is one of the most costly items in local landscapes, both installation and upkeep, so it is not surprising that it's probably the leading cause of garden stress. This is particularly true for those who want an emerald green expanse consisting of a monoculture of grass. 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. Efforts to rid turf of weeds through improper use of herbicide can lead to new problems, either damaged grass or serious harm to trees and shrubs in the landscape. Be sure to read the herbicide label – St. Augustine turf cultivars such as 'Floritam' and 'Palmetto' are found in



most local yards and only a few herbicides can be safely used. **Weed problems**, such as nut sedge and dollar weed, can be prevented by not over watering. Weeds that prefer drier conditions can appear during winter and spring, growing 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 reduce fertilizer use is a **mulching mower** to chop clippings into fine particles, which then breakdown more rapidly and enrich the soil. This also prevents the formation of thatch, a layer of un-decomposed plant detritus, which weakens turf and entails the use of specialized equipment for removal.

Thinning of turf grass under an expanding tree canopy is a frequent source of concern; applying more fertilizer and/or water only make matters worse. As shade approaches 40–50% it becomes impossible for turf grass to grow; the solution is to use a [shade tolerant ground cover](#) plus mulch as needed. Follow the UF Extension [best management practices for maintaining a residential lawn](#) as the surest way to maintain healthy turf grass. Not only will you conserve water and reduce pollution of groundwater, but save money.

Over-watering, not only turf grass but plants in general, is a common source of problems, particularly container grown plants, bedding plants such as impatiens, and vegetables. Too much water suffocates roots and can encourage plant diseases. This can cause wilting followed by the mistaken application of yet more water which only exacerbates the problem and leads to further frustration. [Make sure your irrigation system is operating efficiently](#) and is appropriate for the job at hand – for instance sprinklers are a wasteful way to water a vegetable garden and increase the risk of plant disease.



Trees are another leading cause of stress, 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 it failing to establish 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. [Be sure to correctly water in a newly installed tree](#) – all newly planted trees, including those that are drought tolerant will need supplemental water for up to a year.

Before ever planting a tree, consider what it will look like in your landscape as it matures. Is it size-appropriate for your yard? It may well be more prudent to [select a smaller tree](#) for the site in question. Aside from shading out grass, how will the tree affect other smaller landscape trees and shrubs? Will the canopy interfere with power lines, or develop limbs that directly overhang the house? More importantly, could the root system eventually damage sewer lines, the roof of your swimming pool or even house foundations, not only on your property but neighboring lots? A tree that promises needed shade when you first move in to a new home may over the years develop into a major liability. [Having trees professionally pruned](#) on a regular basis can help avoid future problems. Some homeowners are under the misapprehension that city or county government will remove/trim nuisance trees. Local government responsibility is limited to the trees they plant.



Shrubs, especially those used for hedges, have become the focus of local concern (both financial and aesthetic) since the advent of a serious whitefly infestation of *Ficus*. Widely used in South Florida, *Ficus* found favor producing a dense fast growing hedge. The natural growth habit of the *Ficus* spp used for hedges (large fast growing trees and not shrubs) was already reason to be wary - invasive roots being of major concern. Some of the popular alternatives present their own challenges, e.g., insect pests, disease and limited drought tolerance (Hibiscus) and seedling volunteers (Surinam cherry). Many of the other alternatives, including some attractive native shrubs, are slower growing but they are reasonably drought tolerant and have fewer pest problems. Both ixoras and hibiscus are of limited use as hedges. Together with gardenias they are relatively high maintenance (need irrigation, regular applications of fertilizer and suffer on occasion from pest problems). With that caveat in mind they can all make attractive specimen plants, placed in an area of the yard with plants having similar light and water requirements.



The careless use of herbicides referred to above can be extended to include **pesticides and fertilizers**. At the first sign of spots, blotches or discolored leaves many will spray with a pesticide not realizing that the problem is nutritional. If you know for certain what is responsible for the damage decide if you can live with a few chewed or stippled leaves, given that the pest may not seriously threaten the plant. Disease problems of plants can be reduced by growing them in free draining soil, where there is adequate air circulation, and by not over watering. All pesticides, including seemingly benign formulations such as soap, can be potentially injurious to plants. Mixing together pesticides that aren't compatible can be especially injurious. Keep a record of what you use and when it's applied for each plant - horticultural oils are of low toxicity and can be quite effective, but using them within 3 weeks of sulfur or pesticides containing sulfur can severely burn the leaves. Before spraying make sure the product is appropriate for the problem; **at a minimum read the entire label**. If instructed to use 2 tsp per gallon, don't use 4 tsp thinking it will be twice as effective!

Unnecessary fertilizer, especially nitrogen can encourage excessive soft growth which is more susceptible to insect damage and disease. It can also inhibit flowering, which for fruit trees means reduced crops. Too much fertilizer can also burn plant roots – fertilizer should always be well watered-in and never applied during a drought. Although initially more expensive, slow release or organic fertilizers reduce these risks

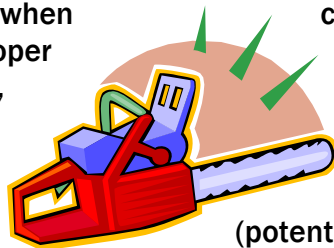


and eventually save money since they don't need to be applied as frequently. When it comes to using pesticides, and to a lesser extent fertilizers, the familiar adage "first, do no harm" should be your guiding principle.

Palms are especially prone to **nutritional disorders**; prevention requires regular applications of fertilizer **as recommended by UF Extension**. Some **native palms** although slow growing are not as prone to nutritional problems or serious diseases such as lethal yellowing. Nutritional problems in palms can be induced by using high nitrogen fertilizers on areas of turf near palms or removing fronds while still green. The latter practice also increases the risk of losing susceptible palms to palmetto weevils. Disease risk can be reduced by not planting palms too close together, limiting above ground irrigation to periods that permit rapid drying of palm foliage and avoiding mechanical damage to the trunk. Disease symptoms on palms can be confused with those due to nutritional deficiencies and some arthropod pests. Avoid costly mistakes by seeking advice before taking action.



Finally, there is stress from **personal injury or sickness** so **consider safety** when gardening particularly when accidents due to improper (especially chain saws, Keep pesticides out of plants are poisonous children helping you biohazards backyard composting of animal waste, insect/animal bites, injuries from plant prickles and spines, and standing water following flooding).



Following the above advice should at least make for more productive use of the time you spend in the yard, save money and hopefully make for an all around more enjoyable landscape. You will also have the satisfaction of contributing toward conserving Miami-Dade's water supply and reducing pollution from excessive use of fertilizer and pesticides.

