

Master Gardener article
May 5, 2015
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Start at the Beginning

Q. We are excited about moving to our first house! We want to plant a garden - flowers and some vegetables. The whole yard is in sun which I good, I guess. What do we do first? Maddie

A. Yes, sun will be great for many flowers and all vegetables. There are a variety of shade loving plants but that's a subject for another year after you've planted a few trees. But first let's start at the beginning.

Good soil, and I can't emphasize it enough - very good soil - will be your most important ally. I speak from experience here, having started gardening in the poor dirt around a concrete patio at my first apartment after college. Dinosaurs were a constant nuisance back then, as deer are today. It's a wonder anything grew in the hard packed ground but I managed to get alyssum to thrive alongside some zinnias. I was inspired and encouraged by my across-the-parking-lot neighbors who had a veritable wilderness of umbrella palms, elephant ears, and trumpet vine visible over their fence. I later discovered they were gardening in large pots. I have to assume they had learned to mix up a great growing medium.

We all can't have a garden like Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in Virginia, but we can be inspired. Notice how the tulips are planted in large groups by color in an oval bed.

Rich soil is the secret to relatively easy gardening. I say relatively easy because you still have to get outside and dig, weed, fertilize, admire and boast. If you are an outdoor person gardening is going to be fun.

I suggest you begin small your first year. Locate the sunniest spot in the yard where you receive constant southern sunlight. Stand facing where the sun sets in the west. The side on your left is the south. If this is your front yard, simply select an area opposite your driveway for an appealing start.

Take your hose or a heavy piece of rope to your selected garden spot and arrange it in an irregular curving shape no larger than about a 10 foot by 14 foot oval or kidney shape. Then mark the shape by digging around it with your shovel. You must dig this area really well to a depth of about 12 inches if possible, to loosen the packed dirt.

If you run into hardpan, very hard packed clay, I would suggest gardening on top of it rather than trying to remove it. You will be going to a garden store for "soil amendments" anyway. So you can construct your garden in a mound, which is great for drainage. You dump on top of this loosened dirt (if you've stayed with the 10'x14' dimensions) maybe 10-15 bags of gardening soil, 5 bags of soil conditioner, 5 of composted manure, and 5 of mushroom compost. I always thought this was composted mushrooms (what a waste of good food, I mused), but thankfully it's the soil medium after mushrooms are harvested.

This sounds like a lot of money but it's really not when you consider the results. Some days \$20 at the nearby garden store will purchase 10 bags of gardening soil. Keep your eye out for sales! If you want to be a thrifty gardener, read those colorful flyers and stroll through garden departments regularly.

Once you've emptied all your bags of amendment components into your new garden spot, shovel like crazy and mix, mix, mix to get the best garden soil prepared for planting. Renting or borrowing a tiller will help with this project from start to finish.

Now the fun part begins. A plan is the most important part of any endeavor. Draw directly in the dirt or on paper what to grow and where you want to grow it. You could put 3-5 tomato plants in the rear, hidden from the street. Tomatoes are pretty easy and only require either staking or a tomato cage. They will have some unsightly brown leaves at the bottom as the season progresses so flowers in front will hide that.

Gardening is a constant learning experience. I always preach “read the tag”. Each plant in a store will have a tag loaded with information about mature height, width, depth to plant, perennial versus annual, whether it’s evergreen or sheds its leaves in the fall. Perennial means it will come back each year whereas annual means it will die at the end of the growing season. If you get a pass along plant – a plant with no tag from a friend or neighbor – quiz them about where it would best thrive. Warning: gift plants that reseed themselves everywhere or rapidly invade neighboring beds are no gift.

Plant flowers in large waves or groups. A dozen yellow Stella de Oro day lilies look lovely together rather than dotted randomly over the landscape. Buy three 6-packs of snapdragons and group these annuals for a show of color. Consult the tag and plant them 18 inches apart.

Welcome to gardening, new home owners! You will learn something new every day, as well as getting your vitamin D and exercise. Plus you will meet the nicest people, trust me. For more information on all of your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton. 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu