

ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

NURTURING *your* LANDSCAPE

HOME
&
GARDEN

By E. T. Robbins

Seals and Crofts had it right when they sang, Summer breeze, makes me feel fine, blowing through the jasmine in my mind. There's nothing like the feel of a gentle wind as you gaze on your backyard landscape. Want to make sure yours is as close to paradise as you can? Read the tips below on soil preparation, plant picks, and pesticide safety.

KNOW THY ZONE AND SOIL

You must understand your hardiness zone. Zones are based on average minimum temperatures for a region. They're a good guideline in determining what plants can and cannot tolerate.

According to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, there are 11 zones in North America. Massachusetts falls in zones 5-7. In other words, what you plant on the Cape may indeed be different from what can survive inland. When in doubt, ask a professional or look it up.

Temperature is not the only indicator of landscape success. Taking care of your soil is important, too. If you're not sure about the pH (acidity) level of your soil (the main factor in plant growth), you can have it tested. Some garden centers perform soil tests, but you can also mail your samples to the University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Plant and Soil Sciences (www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/), where your soil will be tested for a fee.

According to the UMass Soil and Plant Tissue Testing Laboratory, it's important to take samples from all the areas where you plan on planting. Make sure the sample is deep enough to represent where the roots will be. Soil should have a pH between 5.5 and 7.5, but it's important to note that some plants (such as blueberries and rhododendrons) prefer acidic soil. Over-liming soil can knock the pH level off-balance as well, so it's important to do your homework. The testing lab says while there are many products available to raise pH, ground limestone is the most common.

Steve Flynn, owner of Nunan Florist & Greenhouses, Inc. in Georgetown (269 Central Street 978.352.8179, www.nunans.com), says, Most people can take it for granted that they have acidic soil in the Northeast... very rarely will we come across somebody who has an alkaline soil.

Flynn recommends liming twice a year, but especially in the spring since it's important for the soil to be in good shape for plants to establish themselves. Flynn says 50 pounds of lime to 500 square feet is a good rule of thumb.

IT'S ALL IN THE PLANNING

Planning is the most important aspect to landscaping and garden design. The biggest mistakes people make are over-planting or using too many varieties in one place. In essence, less is more.

Lou Seoane, owner of Seoane Landscape Design, Inc. in Abington (551 Bedford Street, 800.245.1300, www.seoanelandscapedesign.com), says, Before you know it, you've used six varieties of plants along one side of a cape house. That's not necessary. Grouping plants in three's and five's – odd numbers like that – tend to look a little more natural.

You also must know how everything will look like when it matures. Roger Sturgis, owner of a Roger B. Sturgis & Associates, Inc. in Waltham (39 Emerson Road #3, 781.893.4884, www.rbsturgis.com), says that you want your landscape to look good years from now, not just in the summer of 2004.

Sturgis says, The actual plants are the very last thing. Where the plants are going to be is a real important part of it.

SHRUB, TREE, AND PLANT PICKS FROM THE EXPERTS

One of Sturgis's picks is itea. Itea is a deciduous shrub for sun or shade. Sturgis says this low-growing shrub has beautiful fall foliage and white flowers in the spring. The best part? Not many people use it, so it's sure to spark conversation.

A sweet-smelling option for sun or shade is viburnum carlesii, which has a fragrant flower in the spring. Sturgis says it's a good choice for entryways or patios.

For sunny areas, Flynn likes potentilla, a drought tolerant shrub that flowers all summer. One of Flynn's favorite evergreens for shady areas is microbiota, which is a Russian cypress.

Flynn says rhododendrons and azaleas are also good picks for your landscape. There are many varieties, but be sure to use ones that are appropriate for your zone. According to the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society (www.rosebay.org), some hardier rhododendrons that perform well include Firestorm, Nova Zembla, and Scarlet Romance (USDA zones 5 and 6).

For a low-maintenance perennial, Flynn recommends hostas. He says, There are varieties that will take full sun. The majority of them take medium to low light. They seem to do well in acid soil and alkaline soil... It's a great maintenance-free plant.

For partial shade, Seoane suggests a flowering plum or Japanese snowbell. For sunny areas, he recommends two flowering shrubs: blue lace hydrangea and spyrta.

Some of Seoane's perennial picks include sedum, shasta daisies, and coneflowers. Seoane says you must take care of what you plant, especially after they flower. Seoane says spending just 30 minutes a week dead-heading will make a difference.

If you cut back those black stems, it's going to promote more growth from inside, and you're going to get more flower buds out of it.



PRACTICING PESTICIDE SAFETY

As Sturgis says, no conversation about landscapes would be complete without a discussion of pesticides. Sturgis says, It's horticulturally responsible to say 'how can I beautify my landscape and reduce my reliance on pesticides?'

The industry term is Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Farmers all the way down to home gardeners are encouraged to educate themselves in IPM.

UMass Extension has a variety of IPM Fact Sheets and helpful links (www.umassextension.org), including Fundamentals of An Insect and Mite IPM Program. The building blocks of IPM include identification of pests, proper treatment, and evaluation.

The fact sheet notes that the about 93 percent of insect species are not pests, and that it's important to preserve insects and mites that feed on potential pests.

Sturgis says that with a little forethought, there are easy ways to reduce pesticide use. He notes, Crab grass, for instance, doesn't grow in the shade, so you don't need to apply a pesticide in the shady part of your lawn.

From plants to pesticides, the same advice holds true: with a little knowledge and planning, you can turn your landscape into a little piece of heaven in your own backyard. ■