HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

PICK RIGHT PLANTS IN RIGHT PLACE FOR YOUR YARD

Now that cooler weather has arrived, it's a good time to get out into your landscape and evaluate the plants. Determine what plants are doing well and which ones are not. This is a good time of year to revamp areas of your yard where things may have not grown to your liking or to your ideal plan.

When planning a landscape, always remember that good design hinges on one basic concept -- the right plant in the right place. This concept matches the site conditions (soil, sun, temperature, moisture) of your landscape with the environmental needs of the plant. Florida is a diverse state, and this includes its climate zones. The soil types, temperature ranges and rainfall patterns differ from region to region. Different conditions may also exist in the same yard.

Plant selection is undoubtedly the fun part of landscaping. Many of us are guilty of purchasing beautiful plants in the garden center on a whim without really knowing what conditions they grow best in or if our landscape is suitable for the plant. Sometimes it works out in our favor, however, sometimes, it doesn't and our once beautiful plant is now struggling just to survive. Practicing the concept of planting the right plant in the right place will save you -- and the plant -- a lot of headaches.

The plants you select determine the wildlife value of your yard, the level of maintenance required, how much money you'll be spending on water or electricity to run a pump, and how much fertilizer or pesticide may be required. Plant selection also will determine how long your landscape will last. For example, fast-growing plants often have a shorter lifespan than slower-growing species.

According to the University of Florida/IFAS Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program, here are some tips for selecting plants and creating a low-maintenance landscape:

- Plants already on your property, particularly native plants, may be well suited to the site and should be retained. Avoid disturbing the root zone (at least to the drip line) of these plants or driving over them with heavy vehicles. Saving existing plants reduces costs and leaves valuable wildlife habitat undisturbed.
- Select from a plant palette that includes suitable native plants. Once native plants are established in the right location, most require little, if any, supplemental water, fertilizer or pesticide.
- If you don't want to continue irrigating after plants become established, select drought-resistant plants that are right for your soil. In wet soggy areas, plant bog-loving plants.
- Consider wildlife. Providing flowering and fruiting plants can bring birds and butterflies into your yard and your view. Florida is a stopover for many migrating and wintering butterflies and birds.
- Limit the number of showy plants that require high water and maintenance, and place them where they'll have the most visual impact.
- Don't plant noxious, invasive species. The state of Florida prohibits planting of Brazilian pepper, Australian pine and melaleuca (cajeput or punk tree). These plants should be removed from your yard, if possible. They crowd out native plants and are seriously threatening Florida's ecosystems and wildlife.
- Aim for diversity. Strive to create a mosaic of trees, shrubs, ground cover, ornamental grasses and wildflowers. Monocultures, which are large expanses of the same species of plant, are prone to disease and insect infestation and do not provide the same benefits to wildlife as a diverse plant community.
- Turf areas should be functional and designed for easy maintenance. If the grass dies or you aren't using a turf area for play or other activities, consider replacing it. Good alternatives are ground covers or landscaped beds including the mosaic of plants described above. Ground covers can be especially useful in shady areas.
See The Florida Yardstick Workbook

If your landscape does need a makeover, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners for lists of plants that grow in Central Florida. The Master Gardeners are available to take your calls at 321-697-3000 Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

A wide variety of Florida plants will be available at the Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Osceola Heritage Park, behind the Kissimmee Valley Livestock Show building. For information, call 321-697-3000.

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