NEW YEAR

The frenzy of the holidays is nearly over. It is time to reflect on another year gone by and dream of the future. Use the lessons learned to help you plan your little bit of heaven on earth. Did the recent cold spell get your attention? Consider planting cold hardy annuals in October to brighten your landscape next winter. Pansies, petunias, calendulas and dusty miller are well adapted to freezing temperatures and will maintain their bright colors in the event of cold. Cold hardy landscape plants don’t need protection so your winter nights will be less stressful.

Drought has been a key issue for commercial agriculture as well as home gardeners. Attractive landscapes that use little water are possible if you select drought tolerant plants. If you enjoy plants that are water loving, group them together to make it easier to water.

Good soil is important for good plant growth. Soil drainage, water holding capacity, soil pH, nutrient content and moisture are all characteristics which influence plant growth. Mulch and compost are two techniques to improve sandy soil and make it more suitable for plants. Save leaves for mulch and spread them 3” to 4” thick around plants. Be sure to pull mulch away from plant stems to prevent stem rots. As the mulch decomposes, earthworms, beetles and other creatures incorporate it into the soil providing free organic matter.

Leaving grass clippings on the lawn is not a sign of laziness. Is good judgement that leads to improved soil conditions. Thatch, an accumulation of dead stems is not a concern when recycling clippings to the lawn. Instead, it is over watering and over fertilizing that causes thatch when excessive growth exceeds decomposition rates.

If you are tired of mowing expanses of lawn, reduce the size of your lawn and add landscape plants. No need to convert it all at once. Start by spreading a thick layer of mulch to establish beds for future plantings. Use water hose to lay out bed lines and adjust them into smooth curves that are easy to mow around.

If you have a new home, plant trees for shade to reduce your electric bills in the coming years. Don’t plant closer than 15’ to 20’ to avoid problems with overhanging limbs. Locate trees strategically to shade western and eastern walls. South facing walls benefit from shade in the summer. Plant deciduous trees that lose their leaves in the winter to allow sunlight to warm south walls and reduce heating bills.

Replace windows on west facing walls with energy efficient types to reduce air conditioning bills and reduce fading of furniture, carpet and curtains. If the cost of windows seems too high, consider putting up shutters to shade windows from the outside.

Florida’s natural environment is changing as we continue to grow and expand our housing and shopping needs. Developers and builders are learning to reduce the impact by planning growth around natural features in the large landscape. Native plants can be planted in a naturalistic design to imitate plant diversity and encourage wildlife. Go native at home, at work or at school and plant native plants to provide food and shelter for birds and other animals. If you live in a heavily wooded area, your neighborhood supports a variety of wildlife. It will also support wildfires. Lessons learned from last year’s wildfires have taught us to evaluate our own risk and create a plan to reduce property damage. Clear out underbrush to 30’ from your home so as to create a defensible space with few shrubs to connect fire from the ground to treetops.

While you have time off, clean out gutters and remove leaves and pine needles from rooftops. Fire resistant roof materials such as tile and metal can significantly reduce your fire risk. Other ideas are listed
in our new University of Florida publication on landscaping to reduce wildfire damage. There is an additional fact sheet for builders and developers. Call (321) 697-3000 for a copy.

Edible landscaping is one way of living off the land. Fruits and vegetables can be a part of any design given adequate sunlight and access to water. Grow crops in traditional rows or plant in and among your landscape plants. Consult with local garden centers or contact us for a seasonal planting guide since our gardening season is different from up north.

Think your life needs a little pizzazz? Be daring and adventurous and start a beehive. You will have honey as well as increased pollination of crops such as cucumbers and squash that need bees to develop. If you have family members with special needs, consider developing your landscape with opportunities for them. Children can plant a pizza garden in a circle with each "slice" planted in a different vegetable. Plant herbs, tomatoes, wheat, onions and peppers as part of a lesson on where pizza ingredients come from.

To make your landscape more accessible, use patio stones or interlocking pavers to create outdoor rooms and walkways in the landscape. Plant in large containers or create raised beds with seating around the edge to reduce back strain. Hanging baskets with retractable pull down cables make watering and grooming a breeze. If you have other ideas to make gardens more accessible to those with special needs, please share them with us so we can include them in our demonstration gardens.

Whatever your experiences this year, reflect on them; they will shape your future. Best wishes for a safe and healthy future.

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