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Planning & Preparation, Cooperation & Consideration Help New Gardeners Succeed

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

My son and his young family recently came by for a Sunday afternoon visit. They wanted advice to improve their outdoor living spaces. He and his wife have very different ideas about getting the job done. One of them likes free flowing, casual beds with hummingbird friendly, colorful flowers. The other wants more formal beds with definite combinations from the color wheel and no "rowdiness" or allergy irritating plants.

Suddenly I was in the middle of a rousing discussion. What's a Mother/Master Gardener to do? As we walked through my wildflower garden, we gathered seeds and talked about plants. I tried to get a feel for the colors, textures, and plant sizes they both liked. There was a lot they could agree on, but there was also quite a bit of head shaking. It became readily apparent that they needed to spend time planning, preparing, considering their choices, and cooperating on a common goal before they could plant a landscape that would succeed under their care.

Even though Fall is an excellent time for planting perennials and bulbs, I told them they should spend the fall and winter planning their gardens and preparing the beds for planting in the Spring. I gave them the following "things to do" list:

• Remove all unwanted statues, fountains, benches or other assorted accumulations from the front, back, and side yards as well as the patio areas. If it won't fit in the new landscape donate it to charity or otherwise get rid of it!

• Complete any unfinished projects such as built-in barbeques, demolition and replacement of old structures, or pouring cement before attempting the landscape.

• Remove overgrown plants, vines, weeds, etc. They have old vines that have taken over their fence and now crawl out into the lawn. They also have some old perennials that have seen better days. It all needs to go!

• Repair or replace fencing as needed. Start with a clean slate! The knotholes in their otherwise sturdy fence offer them unwanted views of their neighbor to the south. They think they want to replace their current unruly vines with a less aggressive variety. I recommend stapling bamboo panels to their current fence and foregoing high maintenance vines. Bamboo panels can be purchased in home/garden centers in 8'X16' sections for a very reasonable price. Of course that might start them down a tropical pathway they don't want to take.

• Put pen to paper and come up with at least a tentative plan. This might help them avoid some frustration as they plan their future refuge, entertainment area and kids play area. Don't forget to plan the view outside from each window or glass door in the home, I strongly encouraged. You can enjoy beauty out the window while doing the dishes, or not!

• Where will the swing set be? Where do you entertain the most? What is your "curb appeal" like when someone comes to your front door? Are there shady areas or is it all sun all the time? All of these questions need an answer.

• Do you really need a lawn in the back yard? There are several attractive, tough ground covers such as lemon thyme which could be grown between large pavers and add additional "living" space adjacent to the patio. Try to incorporate at least a small area in a secluded corner for a table and a couple of chairs where you can escape, relax and rejuvenate.

• Take your plan to the yard and lay hoses or rope to outline flower beds, lawn, play areas, etc. When you think you know where your flower beds will be start hauling in composted steer manure. Buy it in one cubic foot bags at any of the home/garden centers for under $1.00 bag. Layer two to three inches over every future flower bed. It won't smell good for a day or two but the organisms inside the compost go to work immediately and transform sick soil into healthy soil. You don't even have to dig it into the soil unless you really want to. Just add water and leave it alone until planting time in April.

• Plan to use only drought tolerant, pest resistant, low maintenance plants. Busy people with kids and jobs don't have time for finicky plants. Most native plants fall into this category and, once established offer beauty and relatively easy maintenance.

There were only two of my gazillion flowers that they could agree upon: Galliardia and Dianthus. When they have their beds ready next March, we will start over on making the shopping list for plants. I have a feeling that they will have a better understanding of what it is they really want and they will have improved their garden negotiating skills by then.

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