Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

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Gardening Information Is All Around Us

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

You meet the nicest people at Plant Swaps, Landscape Seminars, and Home and Garden Shows! The old timers with lots of gardening experience have so much knowledge to share. People new to gardening ask the cutest questions like, "What exactly is a perennial?" and "Are worms really a good thing?" They are all fun to talk to, learn from, and make you think.

Gardening knowledge is readily available through the Internet, if you have a computer. Just type any word into your search engine and the World Wide Web opens up and spits out much more information than you could ever read on the subject. Type in beneficial insects and you will be amazed how many scary looking bugs are your best friends in the garden. Type in xeriscaping and find out how to save money and water when planning your gardens.

You can find a gardening magazine for every type of garden. I like the ones with before and after pictures and stories of real peoples' gardens. The monthly magazines usually have tips regarding garden chores for each month. It only costs ten or fifteen dollars a year to get lots of good ideas from other gardeners.

You can start your own library of books or you can use the public library and check out gardening books for free. My library leans heavily toward Perennials, Japanese gardens and native plants, whereas book stores offer a wide smattering of gardening books. I have found many books at yard sales and thrift stores that showed little signs of use.

I think the best resource for the home gardener is the Master Gardener office in their area. Master Gardeners receive training and certification through the local County Agricultural Extension office. The program was created to assist homeowners with their gardening questions. This allowed the Farm Advisors to focus on area farmers and their problems. You can call Tuesday and Thursday between 9:30 and 11:30 am and speak to a Master Gardener or leave a message during regular business hours Monday through Friday and someone will return your call. You can read every article the local Master Gardeners have published by going to the website at http://cetulare.ucdavis.edu/mg/mg.htm.

Gardening friends are also a great source of information. For instance, have you seen a little green bug with black spots on your plants and thought it was a "lady bug?" Well, think again! It's a Cucumber Beetle and is very harmful to your vegetable and flower garden. I thought it was a helpful little critter like the aphid eating lady bug until a Master Gardener friend of mine straightened me and the owner of a nursery out. They love squash, pumpkins and gourds along with lots of other delicacies.

If I had to list the five most valuable lessons I've learned about gardening they would be:

1. Your soil must be "alive" with healthy organisms, which does include worms! I have found the best way to achieve good soil is with regular use of composted steer manure and a top layer of compost in every flower bed. When we moved here three years ago the soil was compacted with no signs of earthworms, spiders, or even slugs and snails. After several applications of steer manure our soil is dark, loose and loaded with worms. In summer months we mulch heavily to hold the moisture in and keep the soil cooler for the plant roots and the earthworms.

2. Perennials produce flowers most of the time year after year with little maintenance. Nurseries now offer a large variety of perennials that are suitable for our area. Choose those that are pest and disease resistant, drought tolerant, and love our summer heat. Annuals are useful for a pop of color in small, selected areas. Plant your winter annuals in the early fall and you barely need to water them at all. Plant your summer annuals in early spring, so their root systems are as big as they can be when summer is hot.

3. It is better to plant a wide variety of plants that attract beneficial insects such as the lady beetle and praying mantis, than to spray insecticides. You can never kill all the bad bugs, so why kill the good ones trying? It is better to learn when to expect insects so that you anticipate their arrival and keep their populations low. For example aphids always show up on roses in early spring, but ladybugs will eventually devour them. That's why I prefer spraying the aphids with the garden hose until the ladybugs have caught up to the task.

4. Lawns require a lot of attention, energy, fertilizer, weed control and plenty of water to keep them lush and green. So size the lawn to fit your lifestyle. If the only person who uses your lawn is the gardener who mows it, then it might be time to reconsider why you have a lawn. I prefer flower beds and groundcovers, but my husband does love his lawn!

5. Don't let weeds go to seed! Don't spray roundup or other herbicides when the wind is blowing! And lastly, keep your hula hoe sharp and your muscles toned!

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