

Follow good gardening advice for better blooms, healthier harvests

By Kit Almy

The growing season is just around the corner, so would-be green thumbs may be thinking about starting a garden so they can enjoy colorful flowers or home grown-vegetables.

Growing these two types of plants is similar in some ways and different in others, and if you have limited gardening experience, you may be confused about where to begin.

Here's a primer on what you need to know if you're new to gardening or if you want to expand on what you've done in the past.

Plan before you plant. "Look at your site to identify how sunny it is before you buy plants," said Jan Campbell, who runs the greenhouse at Russell Farm, 5616 N. Riverview Drive.

All vegetables and some flowers – like petunias, marigolds, nasturtiums, and cosmos – need full sun; while pansies, violas, and impatiens are more fragile and need shade, she said.

"You just have to know your dirt," said Emelee Reifschneider, consumer horticulture agent for the Kalamazoo County Extension Office of Michigan State University, 201 W. Kalamazoo Ave.

"I suggest homeowners know what the soil is doing before planning out the garden," she said. This helps determine fertilization needs. For example, nutrients will be more likely to leach out of sandy soil than clay.

For vegetables, "you really need to know the pH," she said. Vegetable gardens generally need a pH range of 6.2 - 6.8, while flowers can tolerate a wider range.

You can get your soil tested for nutrients at some garden centers, and the MSU Extension Office provides a soil testing service that also checks for pH levels, she added.

When you go shopping for plants, Reifschneider said, "Make sure what you're purchasing looks healthy." Check that the plants are free of insects and diseases and that there aren't a lot of yellow or dropping leaves. When selecting vegetable plants look for ones that are sturdy and compact, not leggy, and not in flower or with fruit.

Be sure to follow directions on the plant label or seed packet. "You really need to read the [label]," she added. "It'll tell you how to plant it," including details about when to plant, the germination period of seeds, the growing season, and the size of a mature plant.

After you've done your homework, you should lay out the garden on paper, she said. This way you can plan for spread and height, preventing problems such as cucumbers crowding out other plants or sunflowers casting shade



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over their neighbors.

In this region, most plants can go in the ground anywhere from the middle to the end of May, said Campbell. The goal is to wait until after the last frost, but in Michigan, that can be unpredictable.

"If you get a really warm May, you can plant earlier than the end of the month, as long as you're prepared to cover them up with a sheet or newspaper if there's going to be a frost."

A killing frost can mean wasting lots of time and money, so pay attention to the forecast and be prepared to protect your investments, she added.

Your garden will need to be watered, fertilized, and weeded regularly. Water every morning, not at night, said Campbell, because "you don't want the water to sit on the leaves." Alternatively, you can use a soaker hose, which can run at night.

In very hot weather, you may need to water flowers, especially impatiens, twice a day. "If they start to wilt, just water them and they'll come right back," said Campbell.

Weeding needs differ for flowers and vegetables. Because annuals are usually planted to form a solid carpet, weeding can be minimal.

With impatiens, said Campbell, "the tighter you plant them, the more they'll fill in and choke everything else out."

Vegetables, on the other hand, grow separately, so weeding is necessary.

To save yourself work, "mulching keeps weeds at bay and shades soil to limit loss of moisture," said Reifschneider. A variety of materials can be used as mulch; while wood chips are common, be aware that they tend to pull nitrogen out of the soil, she said.

All plants benefit from fertilizer, and there are various options. Campbell cited the ease of a time-release fertilizer which is put in the ground at planting time and

provides a steady dose of nutrients for three months.

To know the exact concentration you're applying, use a fertilizer attachment to a hose, Reifschneider said.

Because most of the soils in Michigan have plenty of phosphorus – from both natural occurrence and from years of long agricultural use – Campbell also recommended using new zero phosphorus fertilizers, which are gentler on the water supply.

Whatever commercial products are applied to gardens, Reifschneider stressed that consumers should always read product directions. "Even if it's something you've used year after year," she cautioned, the ingredients or concentration may have changed and you might actually be harming your plants.

As for when to expect your crops, gardeners should be aware that vegetables mature at different rates, but all take at least 60 days from planting until they bear fruit, Campbell said. If you plant different kinds, there will be something new to harvest all the time.

Flowers offer more immediate gratification, especially if you buy them at a greenhouse and they're already in bloom. With proper planting, regular watering, and weekly fertilization, you'll have a beautiful burst of flowers about four weeks after planting, Campbell said.

In general, the experts advised that if you follow directions and do things the right way – investing the proper time and attention in your garden – you'll save money on replacement plants and enjoy a more fertile garden.

For more tips and answers to questions and problems, ask your local garden center or call the County Extension office at 383-8830, where you can be connected to the Master Gardeners' Hotline and get information on soil testing services.