

January: Time for Armchair Gardening

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This is the time of year when I am, as my husband puts it, “Burping out” – a reference to the Burpee and other seed catalogues I hungrily pore over, starved for the sight of green. The mail-order nurseries know us gardeners well; this month and next, my mailbox will be stuffed with catalogues.

This one time of year when the garden is dormant can, however, be the most productive season of all. Especially if you are planning a new garden, now’s the time to lay it out on paper and choose the plants to fill it. Even a small, 2x6-foot space can be a tremendous source of beauty, satisfaction, and, if you like, eating pleasure.

Setting Your Priorities

The limited space that many of us have forces us to set some priorities – not such a bad thing, since it’s so easy to get carried away (especially in January!). The two major questions to answer here are:

1. **Why do you want a garden?** Your purpose in gardening is a major determinant of the plants to choose. Some of the possible reasons and the choices they suggest:

- To dress up the foundation and/or entryway of my house -- substantial plants with enduring “presence”: shrubs, small trees, perennials, and ground covers with 4-season interest.
- To have flowers for cutting -- annuals, perennials, and bulbs that bloom generously and/or rebloom after cutting.
- To teach my children to garden -- plants from seeds or bulbs that sprout quickly (peas, beans), that are edible and tasty (carrots, strawberries), that grow quite large (sunflowers, watermelons), or that attract birds and butterflies (red-flowering plants for hummingbirds; parsley and dill for the quite-striking larvae of the black swallowtail butterfly, and black-eyed Susan, coneflower, and garden phlox for the adult butterflies.)
- To have herbs, vegetables, and/or fruits for eating – there are many attractive edible plants that can hold their own in the landscape. Some possibilities: Leaf lettuces and Alpine strawberries (the non-invasive kind) make lovely edging plants; eggplants and peppers are handsome small “shrubs”; thyme and oregano spill beautifully over a garden wall; figs and our native pawpaw (said to be George Washington’s favorite dessert) are beautiful small fruiting trees.
- To fill a shady spot in my lawn where grass won’t grow – shade-tolerant bulbs, perennials, and ground covers. Despite what many people think, shade is not a disaster but an opportunity to grow some truly stunning plants like hostas, ferns, hellebores, brunnera, bergenia, and many more.

- To replace part of my sunny lawn with something I don't have to mow – mondo grass and lily turf are sturdy, low, grasslike plants that don't need mowing; shrub and groundcover roses are taller, and flower as well.

2. How much time are you really, truly going to spend maintaining the garden?

Be absolutely honest with yourself on the answer to this one, and save yourself a lot of mess, stress, and frustration later. Even a small garden has to be watered and weeded over the growing months. If you have little time to garden, and especially if you will be away for long periods during late spring or summer, you can still have a garden; but your choices will be limited to hardy, low-maintenance plantings like small trees, shrubs, ornamental grasses, and native plants.

Analyzing Site Conditions

The next step in planning your garden is to choose your plants for the site in which they will be growing. Three conditions that are given here in Fairfax County are:

1. Our USDA climate zone (6 or 7), which by definition means relatively mild winters. Our winters are not cold enough, and our summers are too hot, for some beautiful trees and plants that require a good winter chilling and/or mild summers. Tulips are a prime example (note that Holland, where most tulip bulbs come from, is on the same latitude as northern Canada). If like me you find them too beautiful to live without, plant them deeply and resign yourself to replanting bulbs every 2-3 years.
2. Heavy clay soil, which will require some amending with organic material like compost or leaf mulch to drain satisfactorily for most plants, and which will never drain freely enough for Western and seaside plants that require sandy soil.
3. High summer humidity. Many northern and western plants that can take our heat can't take the humidity, and will struggle and succumb to various ailments here.

Additional questions to answer about your particular site are: Is it sunny, shady, or something in between? Is it exposed to, or sheltered from, drying winds? Some plants, like roses and garden phlox, need full sun and good air circulation to stay healthy. Others like camellias need shelter from strong sun and drying winds.

Choose plants that will meet your gardening goals, require no more care than you are willing and able to give them, and thrive in the conditions in which they are planted. You will be a satisfied and successful gardener, and next January you will be "Burping out," too!