

Successful planting tips

By Maria Fox

Healthy, beautiful plantings don't just happen. In any endeavor, information and initiative are key to achieving successful results. Planting is no exception. Sure, there are plenty of naturally occurring native landscapes that grow without, and despite, human influences. Mother Nature has perfected tending the knolls, glens and roadsides of the planet for an eternity. Our human experience is vastly less omniscient. Yet, with a little know-how, we can still create healthy, vibrant gardens on our own little patches of the terra firma.

Successful planting begins with the soil. Much as we'd like to think otherwise, natural soil must be amended. This means that not all dirt is good dirt. In fact, unless your thumb is supernaturally green, you will need to enlist the help of horticultural science to be successful. Thankfully, the research has yielded wonderful products in both syn-

thetic and organic formulas, which are effective and easy to use.

In our area, we find a lot of hardpan clay. Not only do you need a shovel, but it takes a pickaxe to dig a hole. Mixing the natural dirt from your garden with the bagged planting mix in a 50/50 ratio or one part compost to three parts native soil are the standard recipes for good planting.

Nursery professionals recommend making a hole at least twice as wide as, but no deeper than, the top of the existing root ball. This means if you have a plant with an 8-inch wide and 10-inch tall root ball, you will need to dig a hole that is 16 inches wide and 10 inches high. This extra space, and extra effort, allows the plant room to grow and "establish" its root system. Place most of the dirt you excavate while digging in a wheelbarrow, and then using your hands, mix in the compost or planting mix at the recommended ratio. Then sprinkle the suggested amount of good starter fertilizer into the hole and backfill

soil. Gently pull the plant out of the pot while carefully pushing back up any roots that have grown out through the drain holes. You may have to "tease" the roots apart if it is pot bound or matted. If your plant is burlap wrapped, place it in the hole and loosen the top tie and pull the burlap down into the hole, where in time it will disintegrate. Fill the remainder of the hole with the amended soil from your wheelbarrow. Do not compact, but firmly compress the soil at the surface securing the root ball snugly.

Water immediately and continue with the recommended maintenance.

In the nursery business, you often hear the phrase "right plant, right place." Plants are conditional creatures. No matter how great the soil, a plant must be given the proper environment for its type. Shade, sun, wet, dry, sandy, loamy — all these conditions must be considered to identify the best location for a plant to grow. The more you understand the needs of the plants you bring home to live in your garden, the greater results you will see. Remember, your plants are not only an investment of money, they are an investment of time.

Books, blogs and magazines can all provide good plant information, but none compare to an experienced professional. Nurseries are full of avid gardeners. Not only do these people have a horticultural education, but they have years of the practical experience tending their own gardens, as well as those of hundreds of customers. They share in the successes and failures of their patrons' gardens as deeply (almost) as they do their own. And if you haven't noticed, gardeners love talking about plants! In fact, a couple of gardeners comparing notes could rival the immediate rapport you find with new mothers.

Smart gardeners endear themselves to their local nursery staff. Who better to steer you towards the best new rose variety, or the healthiest maple, or the time when the truck with the new geraniums will be arriving, or give you that tip for great tomatoes you won't find in a book? Getting to know your local nursery folk is a great way to develop your garden as well as your gardening skills.

Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden, 5026 196th St. S.W., Lynnwood. Contact them at (425) 775-3636 or visit www.wights.com.