5 Steps to Your Best Garden Ever

Why What You Do Now Matters Most

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- An - Introduction

ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVE MOST ABOUT GARDENING IS THAT NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU KNOW, THERE'S ALWAYS MORE TO LEARN.

I have been gardening for most of my life, over half of it professionally. It is my passion and I never take for granted just how fortunate I am to make a living doing what I love.

I have a natural curiosity that always wants to know the *why-do* behind the *how-to*, something that has served me well in this gardening life I've created. Not only do I just plain want to have a deeper understanding of the cause and effects of my actions, but given my profession, it's downright *necessary*.

Accordingly, over the years, I've racked up quite a cache of observations related to my gardening activities. They've allowed me to experiment, assess the consequences (sometimes good, sometimes not-so-good), and to adjust course when necessary to improve my skills.

It's this ability—gleaned from personal experience as well as the shared wisdom of others—that has allowed me to continually improve my skills. That

said, I'm always mindful that Mother Nature is still in charge. In fact, that's one of the other things I love most about gardening. No two years are the same. Just when you think you have it all figured out, Mother Nature shows up with a new challenge.

So while I recognize who's running the show, I relish every opportunity to give her a run for her money.

WINNING WITH FUNDAMENTALS

I welcome the many challenges that each season brings. It's why gardening will never be boring to me; there's always next year and with it, another chance to build on past successes and learnings.

But there are a handful of fundamentals that help ensure a good foundation. Doing just a few key things at the start of a new season, or when starting a new (or first) garden, can go a long way to making your garden virtually bulletproof (or at least, far more resilient than otherwise).

To put it in football terms, it's equivalent to "blocking and tackling." It's not the most glamorous or exciting part of the game, and it rarely ends up in the highlight reel, but the team that focuses on these rudimentary skills and executes them best almost always wins.

Similarly, when we take the time to apply a few basic fundamentals to our craft, not only can we have a winning season, we can have our *Best Garden Ever!* Let's get started.

- Step 1 -

Right Plant, Right Place

Plants growing in their ideal environment are naturally more vigorous and therefore more resistant to pests and disease. But we often make the mistake of putting plants where we want them to go rather than where they should go. Planting that bed of sun-loving annuals under shady trees won't look good for very long. Placing those new shade-loving hostas in full sun will ruin their chances for success. Put the right plant in the right place and you eliminate most of your maintenance problems.

In a former role hosting a national gardening show, we filmed nearly 100 episodes in many of the most famous and jaw-droppingly beautiful gardens in the United States. Some were open to the public, others were privately owned, but all were the types of gardens you and I dream about having in our own little corner of the world (along with the horticulturists to take care of it, of course).

Our travels took us from Anchorage to Miami, from the east coast of Maine across to sunny San Diego, and everywhere in between.

As host, my job was to interview the lead horticulturalist or expert gardener at each of the filming locations. The typical day would start early with a pre-shoot orientation of the garden and grounds, a lay-of-the-land kind of tour.

I would always ride shotgun with the expert of the day, so we could plan our on-camera conversation and various talking points. Early on in my host role,

I took it upon myself to start the get-acquainted dialogue by asking every person I interviewed the exact same question: *"What's the ONE thing you do to keep your garden looking so good all the time?"* Then I'd simply shut up and wait for their answer.

After asking that same question to nearly 100 expert horticulturalists, I got almost the exact same answer from every person: *"We put the right plant in the right place."*

Personally, I knew this to be true before I ever started inquiring from other expert gardeners. The three most important words in real estate are also the three most important words in gardening: *location, location, location!* And just as having the right location in real estate has everything to do with the success of the deal, location has everything to do with the success (or failure) of your plants in your garden.

Place them properly and they will reward you with minimal care. Any plant, no matter the size, will flourish when planted where it is happiest. We know through scientific observation that healthy plants are less susceptible to pests and diseases. Even when those dangers are present, healthier plants are more resistant and resilient to them when attacked. And they rarely—if ever—need chemical intervention.

Plants that thrive in full sun will never look their best in shade. Plants that prefer shade will become quickly stressed in full sun conditions. Plants that thrive in dry conditions will look terrible in wet soil and vice versa. It seems like common sense... yet improper plant placement is a prolific problem!

Just like us, a plant that is under stress doesn't look its best. And more often

than not, the most common reason for that is improper siting in the garden. The natural kneejerk reaction, though, from countless unknowing gardeners trying to 'fix" the problem is to throw extra fertilizer, pesticides, or fungicides at the plant, thinking that will take care of it.

But in all actuality, that's the single worst thing you can do! Plants trying to survive in a less than ideal environment are already using all the reserves they have. Indiscriminately adding extra chemicals only compounds the problem. I liken it to asking someone to run a marathon when they have the flu, and thinking that a new pair of track shoes will make the difference.

Plants in the right place won't need to be "fixed." They'll look great all on their own.

It sounds so simple. And as long as you know what the ideal conditions are for that plant or tree, it really is. Unfortunately, we too often buy on impulse, never knowing much about the plant or even where we'll place it once we do get around to planting.

So in the sprit of putting the right plant in the right place, here are some tips to help you navigate through that all-important first step.

KNOW THE CONDITIONS OF YOUR YARD OR GARDEN

Do you know what zone you're in? It's important to be familiar with the average minimum and maximum temperatures for your area, and then choosing plants that are ideally suited for your environment.

Do you have full sun or full shade? In many cases, you'll have some combination. What about soil moisture. Is it constantly damp or is it hard as concrete? To complicate matters further, there is even dry shade, moist shade, dry sun, and moist sun. It's no wonder we sometimes struggle! Placing the right plant in the right place without knowing the above can be challenging.

RESEARCH AND READ THE TAG

Today there is so much valuable plant information right at your fingertips. A simple internet keyword search like "dry shade groundcover zone 7" will quickly produce several websites from university extension services, garden forums, discussion rooms, magazine articles, and other trustworthy authorities. And each site is sure to be packed with examples of specific plants that meet your criteria.

Furthermore, all plants should come with a tag that provides preferred growing conditions as they relate to sun, shade, and moisture. These days, most plants include a scannable code that provides a wealth of additional information right on your phone.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The right plant, put in the right place, won't need supplemental chemicals for pest or disease control, and fertilization can be kept to a minimum. Even better, given our busy lives, it's nice to know that if we do our homework on the front end, our efforts will be rewarded well into the future. It's an easy rule to follow and it really works, no matter where you live.

- Step  -

Feed the Soil (And Let the Soil Feed the Plants)

There is another world below the soil surface that most home gardeners know little about. Yet soil scientists tell us that in ideal conditions, it is teeming with billions of beneficial microorganisms that provide plants with everything they need to grow and prosper naturally. Of course, that assumes we haven't desiccated the soil with excessive salts that come from overuse of synthetic fertilizers. Instead, we should improve the soil with a steady supply of organic matter—compost, shredded leaves, or aged manure—to promote plant growth by maintaining a healthy soil food web. Spend at least as much time improving the soil where you will place your plants. A healthy growing environment will maximize the return on your investment, literally for pennies on the dollar.

Compost that I made from kitchen scraps, shredded paper, coffee grounds and yard debris. The end result is black gold for the garden. If you can do only one thing for your garden soil, add compost.

I have two axioms I live by when it comes to gardening advice. The first you've just read about: *put the right plant in the right place*.

The second is equally important: *feed the soil, and let the soil feed the plant*.

What? Feed the soil? I know what you're thinking. Soil doesn't need the nutrients; the plants do! So how does feeding the soil help our plants?

Think of it this way in regard to our own bodies. If we're trying be as healthy as we can, do we fill up on a bunch of junk food every time we're hungry? Or is it better to opt for something that satisfies our hunger craving but also isn't loading our bodies with a bunch of fat building empty calories? It's the junk food vs. whole foods argument, but it can be applied to plants, too.

Plants can get their primary nutrients in one of two ways. The first is through manmade synthetic fertilizers. This is typically some sort of salt-based compound which includes nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium, or phosphorus. Those nutrients become available to the plant as the particles dissolve, or when liquid nutrients pass by the roots.

To be sure, this is a time-tested and proven way to get nutrients into the plant quickly. And it works—very well. But so does junk food to ease your hunger pangs—temporarily. While your plants will respond to the fertilizer, and your taste buds will love the junk food, is that *really* how you want to take care of your health… or your plants long term?

Nutrients that aren't immediately taken up as they pass by the roots are gone forever. And that says nothing about the salt remaining behind. To make matters worse, the excess and unused chemicals pass through to our aquifers, or as runoff into watersheds. Either way, the damage downstream to plants, wildlife, and even humans can have adverse consequences.

While it's true that it would take an awful lot of salt to significantly harm all the living organisms in the surrounding soil, it does have an adverse affect to those organisms in the immediate area. And it's precisely this soil that we are trying to protect and improve in health. That brings us to the second method of delivering nutrients to plants, the alternative to synthetic (junk food) fertilizer.

It's organic matter such as compost and organic fertilizer that builds the lasting health of the soil. If synthetics are junk food, then this organic matter is a whole-food diet… and my method of choice for building long-term soil quality and health.

In this method, rather than trying to satisfy the immediate craving by supplying a quick fix with no real nutritional value, the focus instead is on giving soil what it needs to naturally provide nutrients that are available to

The creatures that dwell in soil, from those that you can see like these red wiggler worms, as well as those you can't, such as bacteria and fungi, are the great digesters of the organic matter we put into our compost heaps. Without them, we would have no compost.

plant roots when needed most.
These organic nutrients must first be broken down and digested by soil organisms, from bacteria and fungi to other soil-dwelling creatures including small insects up to the mighty earthworm. Collectively, they release nutrients in an organic form that plants can use, while also improving soil structure.
Unlike water-soluble synthetic chemicals, organically-derived nutrients bind to soil particles and are far less likely to leech.
The net result is a menu of nutrients that remain in the soil until utilized by plants... with little risk of burning or dehydration, even in periods of extreme drought or over-application.

So as we continue to "feed the soil" with organic matter (through compost, leaf litter, worm castings, food scraps, organic fertilizer, etc.) existing soil organisms utilize these inputs... and continue to supply food and nutrients for a soil environment that supports other living organisms and plant life. It creates a thriving, balanced ecosystem. Just the way nature intended.

COMPOST – MY FAVORITE WAY TO FEED THE SOIL (AND HOW TO MAKE IT FOR FREE)

When it comes to feeding soil, my favorite of all organic matter is compost. Whether you buy or make it, I believe it's the single most important ingredient I can add to my garden.

You've already learned that compost adds life and fertility to the soil. But it does so much more.

It improves soil drainage, yet compost allows soil to retain sufficient moisture. Compost helps create the type of soil structure that is critical to allowing nutrients and water to be absorbed, and roots to spread. It helps reduce soil erosion and runoff. It protects plants from certain diseases, moderates pH levels, feeds earthworms and other soil-dwelling creatures, supports beneficial microorganisms, is known to be a growth stimulant, and even buffers toxins in the soil.

There is absolutely no reason you need wait until you have the right system to start composting. For years, I've been successfully composting in nothing more than a pile. This heap was generating heat at nearly 150 degrees! Who says you need a fancy system? Not me!

But here's the best part. *It's free*. You can actually make this superfood of nature from many things you would otherwise throw away from inside and outside your house.

If you choose to make your own, the simplest compost piles are just that—a heap of yard waste and kitchen scraps all in one place. There are no fancy systems, containers, bins, or compartments that facilitate the process. Although a simple pile will suffice to make perfectly usable compost, more elaborate systems can be built or purchased to contain the mix and speed up the decomposition process.

The steps to making compost easily and quickly are far less complicated them many people think. The sooner you can get your pile cooking—or heating up—the faster it will break down. Do the following and I promise, you'll have "black gold" faster than ever before.

PILE IT ON

Don't wait until you have some sort of dedicated compost bin. You don't need it! Find a place in your yard, and just start a pile. Then, begin thinking about your regular waste and how much of it can be turned into compost. Constantly look for sources where you can add ingredients to your heap.

Some things you can add from inside the house: vegetable scraps, dryer lint, paper towel rolls, shredded paper, coffee and tea grounds, etc. (But don't include dairy products, meat, grease, or pet waste.)

From outside: grass clippings, leaves, small sticks and twigs, plant clippings, chicken and rabbit manure. Do not use manure from animals that eat hay from sources that use persistent herbicides on their fields (like horses). Modern herbicides can persist for years through the composting process.

Don't overcomplicate the process. Many books and articles talk about maintaining a magic ratio of green waste (nitrogen source) to brown waste (carbon source). Forget about the math; just keep adding ingredients from wherever you can find them. Just focus on building a nice mix of greens and browns, and shoot for an overall pile size of about three to four feet tall and wide. If you can just keep that in mind, you will be fine. That's what I do.

2

MIX IT UP

Find a pitchfork or garden fork and keep it nearby. Once a week (more is better), turn over or mix your pile as best you can. It will get more difficult as you add volume, but don't worry about that now. The goal is to introduce more oxygen into the center of the heap while blending it all together. This is vitally important to creating compost more quickly. Air is needed because live microorganisms are actually consuming the components inside your pile, and those little guys doing all the work need to breathe. Not turning or aerating your compost heap is one of the biggest reasons for ingredients not breaking down.

If you want to keep things a little more orderly, and still keep it cheap, try a pallet system like this. But whatever system you have, keep mixing it up to help it break down faster.

3

JUST ADD WATER

To keep things simple, spray your pile with a garden hose every time you turn it. Aim for making it moist—like a damp sponge—throughout the heap. A dry pile is another major reason ingredients don't break down quicker. But don't overwater, either. A pile that's too wet doesn't help. More is not better in this case.

That's it. The compost I've made for years uses the exact steps I've outlined above—no more, no less. Do the same and you *will* have compost ready for your garden in a matter of months, start to finish. Compost is ready to use when it's dark brown, earthy-smelling, and crumbly. The end result is the best soil food and conditioner available—it's recycling at its best!

IF YOU'D RATHER BUY IT

As simple as it is to make, it may make sense for a variety of reasons to buy it instead. While I like knowing what's in my compost, there are many reputable compost suppliers where you can buy it by the bag or in bulk.

If you have a large need, buying in bulk will save you significant money over bags. Anything you don't use can be stored for later use. I never run out of places for using compost. And you can't beat the convenience of picking up a few bags when the need arises. The good news is a little goes a long way.

HOW MUCH?

The ultimate goal is to strive for 5% organic matter to volume of your plantable area. But as a general rule, a half-inch to an inch worked into the top several inches of soil will give you excellent results.

To determine how much compost you'll need to cover an area, use a handy online compost or soil calculator; try searching for "how much soil do I need." All you need to know is the square footage of the area you want to cover and the desired depth in inches.

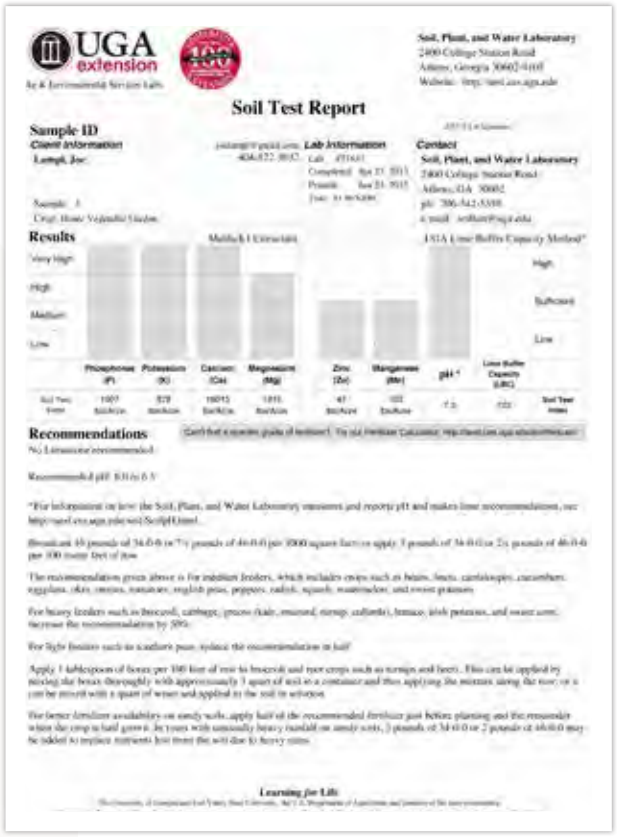
And if you want to know that the compost you're buying is the best it can be, look for a retailer offering *Certified Compost*, as designated by the U.S Composting Council*. Compost carrying this certification has gone through a series of tests to help ensure what you're buying has passed quality assurance standards for safety and effectiveness.

NON-COMPOST, ORGANIC ALTERNATIVES

When shopping for other organic alternatives to boost nutrient content of your soil, options are often listed primarily by what they actually are, such as blood or bone meal or rock phosphate. Here is a partial listing of the most commonly available organic nutrients sorted by their role for providing nitrogen, phosphorus, or potassium.

Nitrogen: Dried blood, blood meal, cottonseed meal, fish emulsion, seaweed extract
Phosphorus: Bone meal, rock phosphate
Potassium: Greensand, sulfate of potash

Somewhere on the package of each, you'll find those three important numbers representing their total analysis of nitrogen, phosphorus, or potassium. Understanding these numbers is the key to knowing what role that product will play in your garden.


UGA extension

Soil Test Report

Results

Recommendations

Learning for Life

While formats vary from lab to lab, the information in a basic soil test report is generally about the same. It's an excellent guide to help take the guesswork out of what you need to do if anything to improve the chemical balance of your soil.

(For a more in-depth look at what those three important numbers on the fertilizer package mean, here's a link to an article I wrote to explain it in easy to understand terms.)

SOIL TEST

I'd be remiss in concluding this discussion without telling you how to address the current state of your existing soil first.

All too often, I believe, we randomly dive into adding inputs in our soil while having no idea whether what we're adding is even necessary. Fortunately, you'd be hard-pressed to cause damage by adding too much organic matter.

However, it should be noted that just because it's organic, doesn't excuse an overuse of certain inputs. For example, chicken manure contains high levels of organic nitrogen. But put too much of it within contact of your plant roots before it's mellowed, and chances are you'll burn up tender plants. As my friend and horticulturalist Dr. Jeff Gillman says, "Snake venom is organic, too. But do you really want to come in contact with it?" Enough said.

So how *do* you know the state of your current soil before your enthusiasm to improve it gets the best of you? The answer lies in a soil test. And the best time to get that done is well before your gardening season gets going. Labs are typically not as busy in the off-season, and you'll still have time to make additions that will provide maximum benefits to your plants.

A soil test is an important step in assessing what you have to work with. Tests are available from a number of sources. You can purchase do-it-yourself kits from a garden center, online, or through mail order sources. However, DIY kits usually don't compare in quality or accuracy to the results you get through your county extension service. Find the county extension service near you or private labs. For my money, the best value and most accurate results come from these experts.

A quality report includes an accurate measurement of the soil pH, as well as the major and minor nutrients. It also provides the type of nutrients—and even suggested amounts—to add to your existing soil to bring it into optimal levels for growing the plants or crops you have specified.

However, most university labs don't routinely provide *organic* recommendations. Unlike synthetic fertilizers that are readily available and easy to apply at the suggested rates, organic options are more diverse and

require larger quantities to achieve equal nutrient levels. These factors and others make organic recommendations more challenging and harder to find.

If you want a report that provides organic equivalents, inquire if that option is available from your local extension service or its university soil lab. You can make the same inquiries to private soil labs that you find online. It may take a little online sleuthing to get to the right source, but if you seek, you will usually find.

One more time: feed the soil, and let the soil feed the plants. Make that part of your new gardening mantra and you'll be well on your way to a safer and more environmentally responsible approach to gardening... and ultimately, a healthier garden overall.

- Step 3 -

Add Mulch: I Can't Imagine a Garden Without it

If you could only do one thing in your garden or landscape that would offer the most benefits for your efforts, add mulch!

Even before I plant the first tree, shrub, flower or edible, I mulch!

I'm fond of saying there are three things you can do to eliminate 95 percent of your gardening challenges. You've already learned the first two. First, put the right plant in the right place. Second, feed the soil, and let the soil feed the plants. And third, add mulch.

Of all the ways I can suggest to save time and work in our landscapes and gardens while doing more for our plants and soil than you can imagine, the generous use of mulch is perhaps the easiest of all. It's practically foolproof... and yet offers so many benefits. In all the years I've been using it, I can easily recall the rare times I failed to put mulch down over a new garden bed. And that season's results were always disastrous compared to the other times.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE MAIN WAYS MULCH GIVES BACK SO MUCH:

SUPPRESSES WEEDS

One of the most loathed tasks for any gardener or weekend warrior is weeding. Now, mulch won't guarantee a weed-free landscape, but it does greatly suppress seed germination by blocking sunlight to the soil surface. And just as with the things you *want* to grow in your garden, if weed seeds don't get adequate sunlight, they won't germinate.

But unfortunately, weeds have the maddening ability to sprout and grow in even the most challenging conditions. Birds, wind, pets, and people will always be couriers of weed seeds, so they'll still sprout in your mulch. But when they do, they're easier to pull out since they're rooted in the loose top layer of mulch.

If you're not convinced, do a side-by-side comparison in one of your garden beds. Add mulch to half; leave the other uncovered. It should only take a few weeks for you to become a mulch disciple like me.

RETAINS MOISTURE

You don't need to be a horticulturist to know just how quickly exposed soil surfaces can dry out under the hot baking sun. Over time, moisture below the surface evaporates away, progressively drying out more deeply with each passing day. Unfortunately, many plant roots grow within the top few inches of soil and suffer when those exposed soil surfaces become dehydrated. Conversely, a three-inch layer of mulch acts to provide a protective, insulating barrier from the evaporative effects of the sun and heat and helps the soil to retain precious moisture far longer and more deeply.

MODERATES SOIL TEMPERATURE

Similarly, that same layer of mulch moderates soil temperatures, keeping temperatures below grade cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Think of mulch as a thermal insulating blanket. Having a generous layer of mulch around your plants and trees can literally make the difference between life and death when it comes to extreme temperatures in both summer and winter.

REDUCES PLANT DISEASE

Many disease pathogens reside in soil. They can easily be splashed up onto

plant foliage by precipitation or irrigation. That's a common way plants become infected. Once again, mulch reduces the chance of this happening by providing a physical barrier, a protective layer that blocks the splashing effects of pathogens and keeps them from making it onto the plant stems and leaves.

IMPROVES SOIL

We've already had a thorough discussion of the importance of adding organic matter to improve soil. Any natural wood or plant-based mulch is a great source for this to improve the soil as it slowly breaks down and decomposes. It's a two-for-one proposition, giving you all the benefits of mulch as well as adding organic matter all in a single step.

PROTECTS TOP SOIL, MINIMIZES SOIL EROSION, AND REDUCES RUNOFF

Surely you've noticed just how hard and crusty the soil surface gets when exposed to the elements. As such, the ground becomes impenetrable, precious top soil has nothing to protect it, and when it rains, there's nothing to buffer the pounding drops or to hold soil in place. All of that adds up to the loss of precious topsoil, erosion, and destructive runoff. And all of that can be eliminated with a minimal layer of mulch. It's such a no-brainer it's hard to imagine that there are gardeners who don't mulch.

I use mulch in all my garden beds. Even the space between beds and pathways gets a generous layer. While always working to improve the soil, it's the icing on the cake for adding the finishing visual touch to any application in the garden or landscape.

ADDS BEAUTY

Finally, there is no denying the eye-pleasing appeal that mulch adds to any landscaped bed. On top of the valuable benefits mulch offers to the health of our plants, a generous layer of mulch adds the finishing touch that complements and sets off your landscape or garden beautifully.
If your landscape needs a quick-fix kind of spruce-up, even if you don't do anything else at all, a top-dressing of fresh mulch to the beds offers an instant TV-yard-makeover punch.

BUYER BEWARE

Although any natural mulch will decompose over time, adding carbon and other important matter to the soil, some mulch can add other materials you would never want. This can include chemicals like arsenic from pressure treated wood. Play it safe with the mulch or soil you buy and look for the certification seal from The Mulch and Soil Council on approved bags. It assures the product you're buying is free of chemical materials**.

MULCH OPTIONS

There are many options when it comes to types of mulch. Choosing the "right" mulch is a matter of taste; but there are some pros and cons to consider with each.

Organic mulches break down over time and eventually must be replaced. Bark mulch is the most common and comes in several sizes and types. The larger the pieces, the more slowly it breaks down.

Adding a 2-3-inch layer of mulch around newly planted trees and plants is nearly as important as backfilling the hole with soil in my book!

Shredded wood can be slightly *fuzzy*, so it will cling to itself, making it a good option for slopes. I use this type most often as it looks great and breaks down slowly. And I do want it to break down... just not so fast that I'm having to replace it all the time. At my place, a 3-inch layer of mulch will last about 3 years before I need to replace it.

Other forms of organic mulch include pine needles, which look great in beds and can help to acidify soil; use them around acid-lovers like blueberries and azaleas. Another favorite is wheat straw. The large bales are easy to work with; I like this best for use in a vegetable garden.

Alternately, you may prefer a more permanent solution such as gravel, stone, lava rock, or brick chips. They don't add any nutrients to the soil, but they don't break down with time, which, depending on your objectives, can be good or bad. Crushed oyster shells neutralize acid soil and alkalize neutral soil. Brick chips, crushed stone, gravel, and poultry grit are pricey but last for many years.

No matter the mulch of choice, the idea is to create a blanket over the soil roughly 2-4 inches thick. Too much and you can actually impede the flow of water reaching the soil surface.

When planting seeds, mulch around the bed, but leave the soil exposed to light and warmth until the seedlings have sprouted and put on some growth. Spread mulch completely around the root zones of new transplants to stabilize temperature and moisture, but keep it pulled back about an inch from stems and leaves close to the surface.

For newly planted trees, be sure to apply mulch out to the dripline or beyond. But by all means, avoid creating "mulch volcanoes" around tree trunks. Covering the trunk will limit air circulation and encourage insects and disease.

OPTIONS WHEN COST IS AN ISSUE

I love a great deal and one of the best when it comes to the garden and landscape is free arborist wood chips. You've seen the trucks from the tree service companies after they've taken down a tree and ground it up. The truck is full of mulch that is usually perfect for using in your landscape and garden.

Many times these companies are happy to dump their load on your property at no charge. Since they have to dump it somewhere, you may just be doing them a favor and all you have to do is ask.

I try to always have a couple loads of wood chips on hand at my house. While it is perfectly safe to use straight from the truck, I like to let it decompose over a year or so as it breaks down into smaller particles. This is purely a personal preference; I just happen to think it looks better as it ages and the size of the chips gets more uniform with time.

HOW TO KNOW HOW MUCH TO BUY

When it comes to knowing how much mulch you'll need to cover any given area, you'll never have to guess. There are numerous free online calculators and apps that will do the calculation for you. Just search for them online. All you need to enter is the depth of mulch you want in inches and the dimensions of the area you want to cover.

Large quantities can be purchased in bulk from any landscape supplier. Of course, for smaller amounts, you can find seemingly endless mulch varieties by the bag at any garden center or box store.

Mulch should be an everyday part of every gardener's arsenal. It's as vital a tool as your shovel or pruners, protecting your investment and hard work and keeping the garden looking great all year.

- Step  -

Space Plants Properly

I believe the saying "everything in moderation" was first uttered in a garden. The exuberance to go big right from the start can lead to breaking some important rules about giving plants room to grow.

Resist the urge to place plants too closely right from the start. If you can do this right from the beginning, you'll save yourself hours of work later, and your plants will look a lot better and be healthier too.

In this day of instant gratification, we want everything. And we want it all right now. The notion of having to actually wait for something is becoming more foreign by the day. Take, for example, your computer. The fact that we have nearly instant access to worldwide information is still hard to fathom. Yet if you're like me, it's the "nearly" part that can be so frustrating, causing my temper to rise when I have to wait a few precious seconds for a webpage to finish loading or when an email—sent mere moments ago from halfway around the world—just doesn't show up in my inbox quickly enough. Crazy right?

Now apply this type of expectation to gardening. We often want instant gratification with our landscapes, too. So we pack in the most plants we can afford so it will appear fuller on Day One. Maximum impact, done and done. It sounds good in theory, but it's asking for trouble.

I love a lush, full landscape as much as anyone, but there's an important difference between artificially making that happen instantly versus allowing plants to mature and your landscape to evolve into that end result over time.

To be sure, we would love to make the "Rooms-To-Go" concept outside. Just buy the complete outdoor room ensemble and you're done. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way with living plants. Sofas don't get bigger over time. Lamps don't grow taller with each season. Yet all too often, many

homeowners don't take into consideration that once newly installed plants get established, most will become much larger in a relatively short time. Sure, if you can afford fully grown trees and shrubs to create an instant landscape, good for you. But for the rest of us, it's better to site plants and trees such that they will grow into a full-looking design—eventually, such that once they reach their mature size, they are properly spaced, and still not overcrowded, which can quickly lead to diseases or dead plants and trees.

Just as I'm sure you prefer a little room to breathe and stretch your limbs, plants and trees do too, literally. Picture yourself being stuck on a crowded elevator. That's bad enough. But then the elevator lights go out and the cooling system shuts down. Now it's warm... and getting hotter by the minute. And the person next to you is sick. Not good.

That's an uncomfortable environment and a breeding ground for all kinds of problems. In many ways, plants are not all that different to us in that regard. They need room—room to breathe, for air to circulate around them, to help them dry out quicker, and to not be jammed up against another plant that happens to get a virus or bacterial infection. And they need sunlight from which to draw energy and grow. But when we plant too closely together, we deny plants what they need to thrive. And just like the elevator scene, it can all go downhill from there.

While the scenario I've laid out describes a typical *instant gratification* landscape, the same is true with a few small plants in a perennial bed, or several vegetables growing in raised bed. Don't misunderstand—my intent is not to discourage you from making the most of your space, but failing to consider a plant's mature size is setting you garden up for challenges and problems. You can pay attention about a plant's size before you plant it... or you'll have to pay attention to it for certain sometime down the road.

When I have an opportunity to give advice to a new gardener, one of the fist things I mention is to start small and add to it later. It's a hard rule to follow

when the gardening bug bites. The enthusiasm is often uncontrollable—to not only start a garden, but to go big in the process.

I get it. Those seeds and six-pack starter seedlings are so tiny. How can they possibly overtake my garden? Three months later, you're cursing the garden and spending your weekends cutting down plants, dealing with diseases, and swearing you'll never do it again.

I believe the saying "everything in moderation" was first uttered in such a garden. In the garden described above (a rather typical scenario, I might add), that exuberance led to breaking some important rules about giving plants proper room to grow.

Overcrowding of plants leads to the lack of air circulation and light, and that is the catalyst to all the sad consequences to follow. Trust me on this one. Having erred more than a few times on this front, I've finally learned that my garden is much happier, healthier, and far more productive when I take into consideration the plants' mature size at the time of planting, when they're still a mere fraction of their future selves.

With all this talk about proper placement when it comes to planting, even veteran gardeners struggle with it. Yet all the information we need to appropriately space whatever we're planting is right at our fingertips. It's that ubiquitous planting tag that's attached to every pot. It tells us all we need to know about the plant's cultural preferences (sun or shade, moist or dry, climate preference, etc.). It also tells us about the plant's mature height

and width, which dictates how far to space it from neighboring plants. Such valuable information, and it's so often ignored.

Seed packs are the same way. Every envelope has information printed on it that tells you the suggested planting depth and spacing. For a vegetable garden, this is especially important and useful information to put into practice if you expect a healthy productive garden.

CHOOSE APPROPRIATE VARIETIES VS. TRYING TO PACK IN TOO MUCH

You can still have a lush looking landscape without overcrowding from the start. By making appropriate plant choices and picking the right varieties, will save you time and money for years to come.

Sometimes even when we try to adhere to horticultural best practices, traditional varieties of the plants we want to use just get too big for the places we want to use them.

In the past, the typical scenario was to deal with the overcrowding situation later by editing—removing plants from the landscape at some point in the future. Not only is that a waste of money and time, it makes for an awkward space in your design, at least temporarily.

Fortunately, we have many options today that are far more appropriate and eliminate the need to edit later. So as you start your garden or add new plants to your landscape, check with your designer, nursery professional, or online retailer to see if there are smaller versions or dwarf varieties of the plants you love. These options come in particularly handy for small-space

gardening situations like a deck or patio. In fact, even vegetable varieties have been bred in recent years specifically for small space gardens and containers. So having a lush, productive and even edible garden with multiple plants is now possible thanks to varieties bred for just such a purpose.

MY FAVORITE DIY RESOURCES

Over the years, I've developed systems to take the guesswork out of providing the proper spacing for plants. Many of these techniques have become a standard part of my planting routine, and are essential when I lay out my vegetable garden. But it can work anywhere you need to do some planting.

MEET THE PLANTING BOARD

For a few bucks (and free if you repurpose) and about 30 minutes, you can make a tool that I find indispensable for planting garden seeds and thinning them out later.

A favorite choice when it comes to planting seeds, small plants, or flowers in a row is what I call a *planting board*. I can't take credit for this one, though. I think I saw it on a Victory Garden show many years ago. Then a while back, I made one based on what I could remember. It worked like a charm. Since then, I've made several more and use them all the time.

Making a planting board is easy. I purchased a 1 x 4 board, and decided on a six-foot length, which I've found works well and is easy to handle. You can use whatever type wood desired. I made marks in my board with a permanent marker every three inches. At the six- and twelve-inch marks, I made V-shaped cuts using a jigsaw and a straightedge. The six-inch marks

were cut one-inch-deep and the twelve-inch marks were 1-1/2 inches deep. This helps you differentiate the intervals at a glance and gives you a visual guide as you sow or plant.

By virtue of the notches and markings on the board, guessing or eyeballing the correct distance between seeds or seedlings is no longer an issue. No getting out string or a tape measure either. Using the guides on the board, simply sow your seeds or plant your seedlings at the desired spacing. I even use the board itself as a tamping tool to firm in the soil over the seeds after sowing. (I do love a tool that can multitask.)

Within a few weeks, I'm back to the same beds with my planting board to thin out my new plants. Again, I can track the desired spacing thanks to the notches and markings on the guide. Since I always sow more seeds than I'll ultimately need, the board also makes it easy to know just how many sprouts to remove to get the exact spacing desired for the plants that will remain.

Making a planting board takes me less than 30 minutes, and it costs nothing when I use a scrap length of lumber I already have. But for no more than a couple of dollars and just a few minutes, I now have a tool to use time and time again and will continue to do so for years to come. Do yourself a favor and make this tool. I promise you'll be glad you did.

Perhaps my greatest discovery is my planting grids. It has saved countless hours trying to properly space and align my seedlings. I can't imagine ever planting another bed without them!

SOME CALL IT A LIVESTOCK PANEL, BUT I CALL IT A *PLANTING GRID*!

My latest obsession when it comes to proper spacing of small plants in my vegetable garden is the *planting grid*. Sure, call it livestock panel when you ask for it at the store, but as

a gardener, I'm telling you its best use is for spacing plants evenly in raised beds or mounded rows.

Commonly found at farm supply stores, a livestock panel is made up of metal wires welded into a large grid. It costs about $20 and typically comes in 16' lengths. The hardest part is getting it home... which really isn't a problem at all in the back of a truck bed. With the help of one other person, simply walk the panel from both ends, into the bed of the truck, with the center of the panel up against the cab and the ends facing towards the tailgate (like a big inverted "U" shape).

Once you get it home, the only tool you need is a pair of bolt cutters, which you can find at any hardware or box store for about $20. Then, with the tool, it's simply a matter of cutting it down to the size of your raised bed or mound. If you're a little OCD like me, this is going to be your new best friend every time you plant in the garden.

Earlier I wrote that a happy plant is a healthy plant. While starting with great soil sets that foundation and then some, don't stop there. You can dramatically help your plants stay happy and healthy by simply doing your part to properly space them in the garden.

- Step 5 -

Water Properly

It may surprise you, but more plants are killed by over-watering than under-watering. That said, supplemental irrigation is critical until they're established.

While it's important that plants always have enough water, irrigation during establishment is critical. Automated systems and soaker hoses are a great aid in that department.

There are two important gardening chores that most people would rather not have to do, either because they don't like it or they don't have the time: weeding and watering. Personally, my attraction to weed-pulling is odd, I know. I'll Zen out for hours pulling one weed at a time while listening to happy songbirds providing the background entertainment—no earbuds required.

But watering is another one of those "mindless" tasks that I actually look forward to. Sure, there are soaker hoses, drip irrigation, and automated irrigation systems that can do most of that work. And I have them all. But I still enjoy watering by hand, and consider it a very important part of making sure I get new plants and trees off to the right start and well-established. Once that's done, I really shouldn't have to hand water ever again.

The most important time in a plant's life as related to its chance of survival and future potential is right at the start. If you really want to have your best garden ever, these are the steps you must take to ensure that success: digging the proper hole, breaking up the roots of a pot-bound plant (more on this in a moment), adding mulch... and providing sufficient supplemental irrigation until the plant is established.

Supplemental irrigation is such an easy step to overlook. You've done all the work to get your new plants in the ground, and now they're on their own, or so you'd like to believe. But if you take this approach, you had better hope for a lot of consistent rain over the next several months.

If you want to ensure you're giving your plants the best chance for success, your job after planting is to help them acclimate to their new environment. Considering most plants have lived all their life in some sort of container, their roots have been able to grow only so far. And once they hit the walls of the planting hole they're in, they don't stop growing. But instead of penetrating the soil of that planting bed, the roots can continue to grow around and around, as if they were still contained in the pot the plant was sold in. Left unchecked, the growing plant can weave a mass of roots that gets tighter and tighter over time. Eventually it can becomes so tightly tangled that the roots will no longer even absorb water.

This is why I mentioned preparing the roots above. When planting new trees and shrubs, even young vegetable seedlings, this root-bound habit happens quickly and only gets worse over time. Your job is to liberate those roots so they have new territory to explore as they get established in their new environment.

And this is why supplemental watering is so important at this stage. Suffice it to say, once plant roots become liberated from their container and you've untangled them, they are a sponge for soaking up much-needed water as they start to put on new growth to meet the demands taking place above ground.

Extra help from you is needed at this critical stage, until there's sufficient new root growth to take in enough water on its own to sustain life independently. How long does that take? It depends. But assume it's at least several weeks up to a few months. Not very scientific, I know. But this is one of those times you have to be in tune with what's going on with your plants and soil. And that takes paying attention on your part, especially during this time. More on the topic of staying proactive in the next chapter.

BEST WATERING TECHNIQUE

Before we talk about how much water to apply, let me explain the best way to water, in my opinion. First, any watering technique is better than no watering technique. But when it comes to making the most of your time and resources (including that of water), make it count.

Soaker hoses are a lifesaver for vegetable and ornamental beds while drip irrigation is best suited for containers and window boxes.

There are two things to keep in mind. First, minimize the amount of water landing on the foliage. Sure, most of it would eventually drip to the ground, but that's not the point. When plant leaves remain wet for too long, it increases their chance of contracting disease. While water is a friend of roots, it is the enemy of foliage. That may sound strange, but it's the truth. Here's a case where we don't want to mimic Mother Nature. Sure, she'll send plenty of rain that drenches your foliage, but don't add to how wet your leaves get when you water.

Direct your watering right at the soil level and around the root area. Depending on what you've planted, an ideal way to do that is with micro-

irrigation. You've seen those spaghetti-like tubes with small emitters that can be placed precisely where you want water to go. It's incredibly efficient, but this method can be a little impractical over a large area or if you're trying to water many plants.

Soaker hoses offer a similar slow-release way of watering right at the soil level. I love both of these methods because they use minimal water, send it right to where the roots are, and keep the water off the foliage. Even better, inexpensive battery-operated timers can put this type of watering on auto-pilot.

Of course, there are overhead sprinklers that shower everything. While they're great for lawns, I don't love using them for plants and beds. Mainly it's a huge waste of water, spraying water where you don't need it, like sidewalks and driveways. Plus, it adds to your maintenance later because all of those weed seedlings (weedlings?) hiding in your beds love the extra water that this indiscriminate kind of irrigation inevitably provides.

Here's what I do. While it's the opposite of auto-pilot, I've never had a plant fail to establish under my watering watch. I water the old-fashioned way, with a garden hose. I like to use a wand attachment that lets me put a gentle flow right at the base of the plant. Best of all, there's no bending over... and what gardener isn't looking for an extra back-saver or two?

My favorite way to irrigate is with a watering wand. The longer shaft allows me to position the soft shower of water right at the soil level and close to the roots. I think it's the most efficient way to deliver water right where you want it to go.

As for how much to water during this time of plant establishment, the answer is "quite a bit,"

initially. For the first two to three weeks, each newly-installed plant or tree gets a thorough soaking about every other day. How do I define "thorough soaking?" I don't. When I feel like each plant has received water sufficient enough to soak the soil in 360 degrees around the plant, I stop. The bigger the plant, the more time and water that will take.

While these instructions may not be as detailed as you'd like, they probably shouldn't be. It's about instinct. A gardener's intuition. Trust your gut. Use the Force. Whatever you want to call it. Just observe. If you're attuned to what your plants are telling you, you'll know if you are watering enough. To me, paying attention will always be the secret weapon to gardening success.

Now, here's one caveat you need to be aware of. Plants that are over-watered often show the same symptoms as plants that aren't getting enough water: the leaves will look limp and dull. But fear not; there's a simple way for you to know which extreme you are dealing with.

It's called the finger test. You stick your finger into the soil down to about the second knuckle. If it comes up dirty, there's enough water in the soil. However, if your finger comes up dry and relatively clean, the soil is too dry and you need to water. Simple, right?

After the first few weeks, you can generally start backing off on the frequency of the watering. The time of year that you install your plants will also have a bearing on how long you need to provide supplemental irrigation. A little longer if you planted in the heat of the summer, less if it's the wet season or winter.

I prefer to do most of my planting in the fall. The soil is still warm—ideal for root development, yet the air is cooling down, so there's a lot less stress and demand on the above-ground growth. Accordingly, there's less demand for water, too. Even so, here in Atlanta, I just did a major installation of plants and trees in early September. While it was getting cooler, I was still watering

every other day for at least a month, and then every third day... even well into December. Then I stopped altogether. The plants and trees had plenty of time to grow those new feeder roots that will serve them well come next summer. (Fortunately, we had a wet winter, too. Always work with what Mother Nature is giving you.)

By June, my new plants may be able to take on the summer without my help. I'll keep an eye on them and supplement the watering if and when needed. No matter what, their first summer will be the only time I'll ever potentially need to assist. After that, they're on their own and won't need my help any longer.

Had I waited until spring to start my installation, I would have needed to water even longer and likely through the summer. With the most demanding time of the year just ahead of them, the plant roots would have needed lots of help in establishing as quickly as possible.

Looking Ahead,

Being Proactive

Years ago, a garden mentor friend came to visit my garden. As we strolled past all the raised beds of thriving vegetable plants, he commented on how healthy and lush everything appeared. I took that as an invitation to tell him about all the things I had done to make sure it looked that way. When I finally finished, he simply said; "that's the difference between proactive and reactive gardening."

While preemptive measures are a vital part of staying ahead of emerging problems in any garden, especially an organic one, I find it pure pleasure to visit my garden often, while doing my proactive work too. The more in touch you are with your garden, the less "work" it becomes.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. It was one of those a-ha moments you never forget. For as long as I had been gardening, I never put a term to it, but that's exactly what I had been doing all this time. It was nice to finally have a name for it.

Proactive gardening is simply doing the important things to ensure the health of your garden *before* you even see a problem. It's all the steps I've described in this book: putting the right plant in the right place, improving the soil, using mulch, spacing plants properly, and watering appropriately. Bottom line, it's providing the best growing environment possible.

But it doesn't stop there. Once you do those things... well, that's when the real magic happens. That's when you take the time to stay in touch with your

garden. The whole key to proactive gardening is to know your garden, so you can catch changes early and prevent possible problems that will require a more severe reaction later.

I haven't been gardening organically my whole life, but I have been gardening for about that long. In those earlier days, I remember chasing all kinds of problems—pests overtaking my plants, stubborn and debilitating diseases, weed infestations, even the constant need to water. I'd chase every problem with a chemical or in the case of watering, spend hours with a hose in my hand. Well, that was *reactive* gardening. And thank goodness, those days are long gone for me.

Little did I know back then that my reactive nature was a big part of the problem, and it put me into an endless cycle of crisis management. It was the equivalent to the dog chasing his tail. My reaction to one thing may have temporarily alleviated that issue, but that very action was simultaneously throwing something else out of whack, therefore leading to a whole new set of problems. It took me a long time to understand that.

And one more benefit to staying in touch with your garden—finding those hidden gems and treasures at the peak of ripeness (and before the critters do!)

With proactive gardening, you take the time to get to know your garden and plants. But don't just look at them from a distance as you stroll by. Stop and admire them if you like, but definitely inspect them. Look under the leaves. Do you see any egg clusters from pest insects? How about spotting foliage on your tomato plant, boxwoods, or azaleas? Are any leaves being eaten on your squash plants or roses? As a proactive gardener,

these are the types of things you're looking for... *early in the process*. I can't emphasis that enough.

The key to a thriving proactive garden—without the use of chemicals—is to catch any adverse changes early and deal with them preemptively, before they get out of hand and you find yourself reacting in a more severe manner later. That's not good for you, your garden, or the environment!

If you want to have your best garden ever and enjoy knowing it's that way because of the steps you took to make it so, be a proactive gardener. Take the time to start your garden out right, and don't stop there. By involving yourself in your garden frequently, you'll be able to take *simple steps* to deal with what could be bigger problems later. It's a lot more fun, and you learn how to be a better gardener in the process.

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you've enjoyed it and found some simple yet practical ways to have your *best garden ever*!

Resources - and - Links:

The U.S. Composting Council
To learn more about Certified Compost and more.
CompostingCouncil.org

The Mulch and Soil Council
To learn about Certified Mulch and more.
MulchAndSoilCouncil.org

EPISODES TO WATCH FROM GROWING A GREENER WORLD®
COVERING TOPICS IN THIS BOOK:

Episode 106 – Compost
GrowingAGreenerWorld.com/episode106

Episode 225 – Backyard Composting
GrowingAGreenerWorld.com/episode225

Episode 302 – Healthy Soil
GrowingAGreenerWorld.com/episode302

Episode 504 – Setting up a Garden
GrowingAGreenerWorld.com/building-a-garden

DISCLOSURES:

*U.S. Composting Council: At the time of this writing, I am the spokesperson for the US Composting Council (USCC). However, this is not a sponsored post. While the USCC compensates me as spokesperson in other ways, the thoughts and opinions in this writing (and in all cases) are indeed my own, and the USCC had no influence in my decision to mention them here. I simply believe the inclusion of the information related to Certified Compost is of value to my readers and as such, decided to include it here. Rest assured that I only accept business relationships when I genuinely believe in a product or service, use it personally, or believe it to be good information worth sharing with my audience.

**Mulch and Soil Council: Several years ago, I was the spokesperson of the Mulch and Soil Council. However, I have no relationship, financial or otherwise with them now. I simply believe the inclusion of the information related to the MSC Certification label is of value to my readers and as such, decided to include it here. Rest assured that I only accept business relationships when I genuinely believe in a product or service, use it personally, or believe it to be good information worth sharing with my audience.

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- About -
Joe Lamp'l

Joe Lamp'l's (aka joe gardener®) infatuation with gardening and nature began as a child. After a run-in with his parents' favorite shrub, he panicked and jammed the broken branch into the ground. A few weeks later, it had taken root. Joe was not only relieved; he was also hooked on horticulture.

As one of the country's most recognized and trusted personalities in gardening and green-living, that passion for living a greener life is evident to a nationwide audience who watches Joe in his current role as Creator, Executive Producer and Host of the award-winning PBS series, *Growing a Greener World*® and previously as host of *Fresh from the Garden* on DIY Network and *GardenSMART* on PBS. Joe also shares his know-how on NBC's *TODAY SHOW*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, *The Weather Channel* and through his popular books, podcast series, nationally syndicated newspaper column and more.

The American Horticultural Society selected Joe as the recipient of the Society's B.Y. Morrison Communication Award, which recognizes effective and inspirational communication—through print, radio, television, and online media. The Garden Writers Association has twice named Joe as Best On-Air Talent for Television.

Off-camera, Joe is founder and Joe behind joegardener.com—a website and digital media platform devoted to environmentally responsible gardening and sustainable outdoor living. Joe is deeply committed to "growing a greener world" through his television series, podcasts and books including, *The Green Gardener's Guide*.

When not talking or writing about gardening and living green, Joe can likely be found in and around his organic garden and spending time with his family on their north Atlanta, GA farm.

Let's Connect!