

General Maintenance and Care of Your New Plants

These basic recommendations are intended to help your new plants settle into the garden. Please see the plant maintenance spreadsheet to learn more about how to care for the specific plants used in your garden.

Gardens are dynamic entities - they change over time in response to a myriad of evolving conditions such as light, moisture, wind, usage, maintenance, temperature, diseases, etc. As a result gardens can be extremely frustrating to manage. We hope that my work with you will not end when I present the final plan or lay that last bag of mulch, but that ours may be a continuing relationship. Please don't hesitate to call us if you have questions or concerns about your plants, the design, or the installation.

Watering

In general, you will need to water plants regularly for the first year after installation. Properly watered plants are able to resist pests and diseases. It is normally better to water very thoroughly and less frequently. This encourages roots to grow deeply, while frequent, light watering produces shallow-rooted plants that become highly dependent on your care. A good rule of thumb is that plants should get 1 inch of water per week. One way to test how much water you're giving is to set a rain gauge or can into the garden and measure the water that lands in the receptacle when you water. Or when you have finished watering, do a little test by digging into the soil with your finger to determine how deep the water has penetrated. You may be surprised to see that even what you thought was a thorough watering did not actually deliver water very deep into the soil. Ideally, after a good soaking the soil should be moist several inches deep.

Watering during the first year after trees and shrubs are planted: This is the critical time for a young tree or shrub to get established. When there is little or no rain (less than one inch per week), I recommend watering thoroughly (a real soaking) with a sprinkler or handheld garden hose once every 7-14 days. You may also use a green Gator bag that drips several gallons of water for a week. If it is unbearably hot and dry for a long time, you might consider watering a little more often - perhaps every 5-10 days. In the dead of winter, they may need less attention but do water if there has not been rain or snow. Herbaceous plants, such as perennials and groundcovers, are more likely to show their thirst with droopy or withered leaves. Water them when you water your woody plants - or more frequently if they look bedraggled.

Even established, mature plantings need water during times of prolonged drought. This includes all of your plants - perennials, shrubs, and trees. Azaleas, Hydrangeas, and Japanese maples are three common woody plants that are particularly susceptible to drought.

On the other hand, please do not water your plants more frequently than recommended; many new plants die from over watering, especially if soil does not drain quickly. Excess moisture may cause roots to rot or succumb to fungus or disease.

Feeding

I do not recommend that you spend a lot of time or money chemically fertilizing healthy plants. For the most part, given reasonably rich garden soil and a bit of TLC, shrubs and trees will do fine without fertilizer. A better use of your effort is a light, annual application of organic matter to your garden - this might come in the form of home-made or purchased compost, leaf mold, or even finely shredded mulch. If you feel you must feed woody plants, use a slow-release balanced fertilizer and don't apply more than once per year. One useful fertilizer is an annual top-dressing of organic Hollytone for acid-loving plants such as Hollies, Camellias, Rhododendrons, and Azaleas. If you're unsure what plants like acidic soil, check the package for a thorough list.

If a plant appears unhealthy, consult with me or take a sample of the plant to a Master Gardeners' clinic at Brookside Gardens or another location.

Bulbs do like a bit of nutritional support and you can promote longevity by applying granular bulb food when planted and just after blooming has finished. After blooming is the period that bulbs gather energy to last through their dormant period and into the next blooming season. (Note also that cutting or tying bulb foliage after blooming hinders the ability of these plants to feed themselves and prepare for next year)

Pruning, Deadheading & Dividing

In general, please refrain from shearing your shrubs which leave partially cut leaves and create artificial straight lines of growth. Some hedging plants such as Yews, Hollies, and Boxwood will tolerate shearing, but most plants benefit more from hand pruning to thin dense growth for better air circulation and light. Itea, Clethra, some Hydrangeas (H. arborescens, H. paniculata, H. petiolaris, and H. quercifolia), Viburnums, and Fothergilla do not generally need trimming at all, except to help manage size. You can always prune away the three D's - dead, dying or diseased limbs.

Some flowering shrubs bloom on new wood and some bloom on old wood. Optimal pruning time depends on how each plant blooms, so if you prune a mophead hydrangea (blooms on old wood) in the fall, you are removing some of next summer's flower buds. Likewise, for full bloom, prune azaleas and lilacs (bloom on old wood) immediately after they bloom. That said; do prune hydrangeas and azaleas if they are growing out of their intended space.

We select many perennials to provide a long season of interest in hope that you may want to keep the dried blossoms in the garden. Look for interesting seed heads (like candy for wildlife) and strong architectural form among Astilbe, Coneflowers, Grasses, Sedum, Joe-pye weed, Turtlehead, and Russian Sage, to name a few. Even if you appreciate the winter silhouette of these plants, some plants look too untidy or unpleasant by January or February and you should cut the stems to the ground. This will depend a great deal on the severity of the weather and on your own personal taste. Some perennials, such as False Indigo, turn black and mushy after the first hard frost and you may want to remove these earlier. We tend to cut perennials back twice depending on how things look: once in November when we rake the leaves and once in late February before new growth begins.

Perennials do spread, but they do not necessarily need a lot of maintenance. Some wander more than others in the garden, and we took your tolerance for such wandering, as well as the size of your garden, into consideration when we designed your landscape. You will find that most perennials may be easily divided if they've outgrown their space. Share some with a friend or neighbor or toss them on the compost heap. If you need specific instructions or recommendations on this topic, just let us know.

Resources

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/consumer/factsheets/shrubs/text/pruning.html> (overview on pruning shrubs)

<http://www.gardengatemagazine.com/extras/pdf/60dividing.pdf> (chart with information about how and when to divide perennials)

The Well Tended Perennial Garden: Planting and Pruning Techniques. Tracy diSabato-Aust, Timber Press: 2006.

Manual of Woody Landscape Plants Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses, Michael Dirr. Stipes Publishing: 1998.

Encyclopedia of Perennials. Graham Rice and Kurt Bloemel. DK Books: 2006.

Organic composted fertilizers locally produced:

Leaf Gro and Compro <http://www.menv.com>

Chesapeake Green - made of poultry litter, clam shells and wood chips

Chesapeake Blue - made of crab shells and wood chips