

How To Be A Successful Gardener

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There are a lot of self help books out there for gardening. There are dozens of gardening magazines, web sites, blogs and other information. Naturally I have to also say that some of the best help available for local gardeners is going to be the information that we have for free at the Geary County Extension Office, 119 East 9th Street. Lots of bulletins about flower gardening, vegetable gardening, lawns and ornamentals.

But when you come right down to it, a lot of gardening is really all about the basics. But the basics here on the plains of Kansas are different than the basics in Texas, or Pennsylvania, or Chicago, or many other places where they publish gardening books and magazines. So following are some basic tips that I tell all vegetable and flower gardeners.

Many of our soils are high in clay content. This can make them a real challenge to work with. There are no magic solutions or additives that you can spray on to make them better. The only solution is compost or organic matter. By tilling in organic matter of nearly any kind, compost, leaves, rotted silage, composted manure, etc., you help to break up those clay soils and make them much easier to work with, more readily taking in water and then releasing it back to the plants.

Next, use organic mulches whenever possible. With our variable weather we need to cool the soil and protect it from our winds. Around landscape plants I like to use bark mulch. I'm fond of shredded cypress because it breaks down slower. In gardens I like to use wheat straw, prairie hay, grass clippings are okay if they are dried first. Trying to use fresh mowed grass clippings will lead to developing the equivalent of a thatched roof. Not good! You also don't want to use grass clippings for a couple of mowings after herbicides are applied. The residue can damage tender and sensitive garden plants.

Avoid using sprinklers to water gardens and flowerbeds. For one thing, sprinklers put all the water in the air, often in fine droplet form. You lose a lot of water to evaporation that way. I'll begrudgingly allow them on lawns, but confine your lawn sprinkling from 3:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. We can have low humidity and high wind speeds in the summer and the loss to evaporation is just too great.

Additionally, especially in gardens and flower beds, sprinklers lead to wet leaves and wet leaves lead to diseases. Use drip irrigation, black soaker hoses, even a slow running open hose and furrows in the vegetable garden. Keep the water at the base of plants and you'll use less water, you'll have healthier plants and better produce!

Don't be a spray and pray type of gardener. But don't hesitate to use a pesticide if needed. Many pesticide applications aren't really necessary or they are done in the wrong way and at the wrong time. Know what the problem is and whether treatment is needed and then what will work. If you aren't sure what the problem is, bring it in to me for identification. It's what I'm here for!

Finally, recognize that we are between a zone 5b and 6a hardiness zone. Our frost free date is Mother's Day. Purchase plants that are adapted and then plant them in the right place at the right time. If you aren't sure, yup, you guessed it, ask me! Gardening is great fun, and after this winter we'll all need a little gardening, to help clear the cobwebs of winter out of our minds and our souls!