

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

A garden can physically, mentally, and spiritually enrich our lives. It creates an improved quality of life by providing a place where we can heal, where we can lose our stress, where we can discover peace, and where everyone is accepted. A garden keeps our minds and bodies active. Sometimes our lives are affected in ways that make gardening difficult as when sight is diminished. At these times we need to rethink how we garden. Employing enabling techniques saves effort without compromising the results. The garden should be directed toward the gardener's preferences, motivation, and skill level.

Paths should be level, smooth and as straight as possible. A consistent type of surface prevents stumbling. Good drainage prevents slipping. Distinct edges assist orientation. Wind chimes and the sound of running water help in determining location in the garden. Keeping garden paths clear by removing carts, hoses, and tools helps prevent tripping. Low containers, while aesthetically pleasing, can also be a tripping hazard.

Ramps should not exceed a 5 percent grade and should have railings or barriers on both sides. When steps are used, a railing, beginning several feet before the steps begin, would add safety. Safety is also improved by the use of painted steps and the use of reflective materials which offers contrast. This is particularly important for individuals with decreased depth perception.

The presence of decals on sliding glass doors assist in determining if the door is open or closed. A garden seat provides an area to relax and enjoy the garden. Plants in this area should appeal to senses other than sight. The odors of sweet peas, honeysuckle, lavender, and rosemary may evoke delightful memories. Some plants have differing textures, such as lambs ears and pussy willow which are soft and fuzzy, hibiscus and lilies which are silky feeling, and statice which has a papery feel. Wind blowing through the garden sets different moods – the poplars flap, the willows whisper, the bamboos rustle, and the seed pods rustle. The sounds of the garden change from season to season. The pale colors of violet, yellow, green and blue may be difficult to distinguish; therefore, use plants which are bright in color such as red or orange.

Raised beds are easier to care for and harvest from than plants growing directly in the ground. A reach of no more than two feet over the soil assures caretaker balance. A metal guide or a wooden block with evenly spaced holes placed across the garden would be a planting guide. A rope with knots tied at intervals and stretched between two stakes would also indicate planting locations. Plants growing away from the rope can be considered a weed and therefore pulled. Planting in groups of at least three makes the locations of plants easier to determine. Large seeds and seed tapes are more easily seen and handled than small individual seeds. A few seeds may be spread on a three-fourths inch wide piece of tissue, which is then wadded up and planted. Plants can be identified by ornamental stakes, large print labels and Braille.

Green and brown tools are easily lost in the foliage and soil. To prevent this, a cord may be tied around the handle or fluorescent paint may be sprayed on the handle. If a short handled tool is being used, the gardener is able to feel the soil. To decrease the amount of time searching for tools in the storage area, the outline of each tool on a pegboard will show where each tool belongs. A magnifying glass or a sighted friend may be helpful in detecting diseases or pests in the garden.

Carrying a whistle and blowing short blasts on it can alert others when assistance is needed.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.