

# 25 Tips and Skills to Make You a Better Gardener

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## Sound gardening advice

You may already be an outstanding gardener, but you can better your skills by discovering things you did not know. Countless resources are available to give you sound, science-based gardening advice.

1. Know your USDA climate zone. Skagit County zones range from 8A in Anacortes to 5B in Rockport—a world of difference in plant hardiness. Anacortes has a windy oceanic climate that is affected by its proximity to Puget Sound. By contrast, Mount Vernon has a Mediterranean climate—dry summers, cool moist winters.
2. Know your soil. It is difficult to change your soil type. Adding sand to clay soil will not give you sandy loam. Do a “feel” test by squeezing a handful of soil to gauge the structure. Determine pH and fertility with a soil test. Ideal soil has about 5% organic matter. Add organic mulch regularly will improve both soil structure and fertility.
3. Deal with drought. It’s a reality. Despite eight months of cool rainy weather, summer often brings periods of up to 80 days with little rain. Choose sturdy plants that are adapted to these conditions, and group them together by their water needs.
4. Mulch is a must! Black plastic is a no-no! Soil needs air. Mulch keeps soil cool and moist in summer and warmer in winter. It helps limit weeds and control erosion. It reduces compaction and encourages beneficial organisms.
5. Buy good plants. Resist the urge to “rescue” a sickly plant. Check the roots of a plant to see if they are healthy and not pot bound. Despite how much TLC you administer, an unhealthy plant will never perform as well as a plant that is healthy to begin with. Don’t waste your time and money.
6. Invest in good pruners, and keep them sharp. Solid construction with heavy duty, by-pass steel blades and a comfortable grip are essential. Good tools will last years.
7. Recognize suckers and water sprouts. Suckers come from the base of tree and are often the result of a disturbed root system. Water sprouts are those young whip-like stems that shoot straight up on mature branches. Both should be cut off cleanly at their base.
8. Sharpen a shovel. Clamp the clean shovel in a vise with the blade up facing you. Start at one edge using an 8-10-inch bastard file and push it toward the center of the shovel, holding it at a 45-degree angle. Work toward the center of the shovel, then move to the other side and repeat. Do not sharpen the back side of the shovel.



Nothing makes a yard look neater than a nice, crisp edge. Also, get weeds early while they are young and before they spread. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

9. Dig a \$50 hole. Dig a hole twice the width of the root ball. This encourages roots to spread out into surrounding native soil. The hole should only be the depth of the root ball so that the crown doesn't stick up and dry out, not so deep that water puddles around the crown causing it to rot. Refill with the same soil, and don't add amendments to the planting hole. Water well to lightly compact the soil (no stomping) and add a 3-inch layer of organic mulch. Water regularly until established, as long as two to three years for some shrubs and trees.
10. Promote mycorrhizae. These unseen fungi, a plant's best friend, act as an extension of the plant's roots to help them take up nutrients and water, fend off disease and improve soil structure. You can help by **not** adding excess fertilizers or pesticides.
11. Identify it before you squash it. Learn to recognize good bugs from bad. Buy an insect identification guide, or look online at an integrated pest-management site such as [www.ipmimages.org](http://www.ipmimages.org).
12. Manage weeds. Get 'em while they're little before they set seed, and get the entire root. Use mulch to suppress them.
13. Deadhead. Cut off spent blooms to prevent a plant from going to seed. In most cases, this forces a plant into a second round of blooms; your plants also look neater.
14. Space plants properly. Give plants room to grow regardless of what you grow. It takes patience, but your reward is healthier plants. This does not apply to container plantings.

15. Hang a bat house. This flying mammal is one of a gardener's best friends, munching on troublesome insects like mosquitoes. Hang it at least 15 feet off the ground on the south-facing side of a building or pole—not in a tree.
16. Water wisely. Roots need water. Soaker hoses or drip irrigation put water where it is needed.
17. Pinch a plant. Taking away some new growth back to a node where two new stems emerge will give you a stronger, bushier plant with more blooms.
18. Attract beneficial wildlife. Encourage birds, frogs and pollinators to take up residence in your yard. Choose a variety of plants that provide food sources and water. Planting in layers provides different heights for hunting, nesting and foraging.
19. Read plant tags. They are full of information to help you succeed. Learn what those gardening symbols mean.
20. Succeed with succulents. Give them excellent drainage, and these small, hardy, low maintenance plants will last for years.
21. Edge a bed. Nothing makes a yard look neater than a nice crisp edge along the borders.
22. Rejuvenate an old shrub. An overgrown or neglected multi-stemmed shrub, such as forsythia, can be cut back in late winter or early spring. Remove one-third of the largest, oldest stems at ground level each year for three years.
23. To till or not to till? Don't. Tilling destroys soil structure and stirs up dormant seeds. It can also compact the soil below the reach of the blades.
24. Be observant. Study what is going on in your yard throughout the year. Notice the colors, textures, fragrances, leaf shapes, bark and other characteristics. Take photographs!
25. Contact your local WSU Extension Master Garden office for local gardening information: (360) 428-4270, or go to <http://gardening.wsu.edu/home>

### **RESOURCES:**

- *Fine Gardening Magazine*. Volume 128. Taunton Press
- *Gardener to Gardener*. 1,001 Greatest Gardening Tips. Rodale Organic Gardening Books
- *1001 Hints and Tips for Your Garden*. Reader's Digest.
- *Sustainable Landscapes and Gardens: Good Science- Practical Application*. Linda Chalker-Scott.

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.