

Home Treasures

By Diana Wisen
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What to do with those plants you bought

You've been to the local nursery, a garden center, or a Plant Fair. You've come home with hope in your heart and in the back of your vehicle. Now what?

First, if you park your vehicle outside, take the plants out and put them in a shady spot so they don't bake. Water the soil well and let them drain. If some are small seedlings of vegetables or flowers, it's wise to put them up off the ground because slugs and snails can smell dinner a long way away.

Some plants such as tomatoes, beans, squash, or corn may have been living in greenhouse conditions and need to wait for the warmer soil of early June. You can begin to harden them off by putting them outdoors during the day and bringing them inside at night, gradually letting them get used to being outdoors. Cool season vegetables can go into the ground now. If your tomato plants are already used to being outdoors, make sure your garden soil is about 60 degrees Fahrenheit before you plant them.

Now the big question. Where are you going to put all those plants?

If you are a disciplined gardener, you probably brought a shopping list and stuck to it. However, if you are like most gardeners, you tend to get carried away and buy more than you have any idea of where to plant them. You think to yourself, "I'll find a place when I get home" or "There is always room for one more plant."

The first step is to consider the needs of each plant. "Right plant, right place" means you place a plant where it will thrive because the site provides the best environment for the cultural requirements of that particular plant. You need to consider soil conditions, sunlight and aspect, shade, drainage, access to water, space to grow, nutritional needs, maintenance, and why you bought that plant in the first place, perhaps fragrance, color, privacy, or food.

Secondly, can you and your garden provide the right environment or are you going to have to make some changes? Compact clay soil may mean you might have to use raised beds, either by mounding the soil or using containers, especially if you raise vegetables. Some shrubs need protection from cold winter winds. Fruit trees need full sun at least 6 or more hours a day. Most flowering annuals and bulbs do best with full sun. Morning sun is cooler than afternoon sun which can be too hot for some plants. Some plants are

heavy feeders and need lots of water, i.e., roses. Whereas many herbs need leaner conditions and less water. Do your homework. Read those plant tags and use the QR code to get the information you need to make good planting decisions. Your plant wants to live but it is up to you to provide for its requirements.



After purchasing an assortment of plants, make sure you water your plants thoroughly before planting. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

For a vegetable garden or renovating a landscape, a soil test is advised so that you know what you are dealing with. Adding things that are not needed is a waste of time, money, and can even cause problems. Compost is great, but more is not necessarily better. Plants need 45% mineral soil by volume. Air space and space for water make up 50%, and the ideal organic matter is about 5%. Also be sure to check the rate your soil drains. Most plants do not like constantly wet roots.

Do you know how big your plant will get? That tiny cabbage seedling can be 3ft wide at maturity. Spacing is important whether you are planting a tree, shrub, perennial or annual. With trees and shrubs, it is smart to add at least 50% to what the plant tags says for its size at 10 years. Roots go out far beyond the dripline. With our long, mild growing season in Skagit County, permanent plants usually get much larger.

Proper planting gets your new plant off to a good start. Improper planting may doom it, whether right away or down the road. Before you plant, water the plant deeply so that it is thoroughly hydrated. For shrubs, trees, and perennials, loosen the soil in the area and remove any weeds. Dig a hole 3 times the width of the root ball and no deeper than the root ball. The crown should sit level with surrounding soil or a little bit higher. It will

settle a bit when you water it in. Inspect the roots of the plant, loosen, and cut off broken or circling or kinked roots. Remove any packing material. If balled and burlapped, completely remove all burlap, wire, or string. These will hinder the plant's roots from getting established.

Loosen the roots and gently spread them over a small mound of native soil. Fill the hole with the same soil you dug out. Do not add amendments, even to clay soil. Gently and deeply water in your new plant. This technique is called 'puddling'. Water regularly. Shrubs, trees, and perennials need extra water their first year. Mulch with 3 inches of arborist chips to conserve moisture, keep the soil temperature more even, and discourage weeds. Annual flowers and vegetable starts need good spacing and regular attention to meet their water and nutrition needs. Make a point of observing your garden daily if possible.

Plant what you love! Gardening makes us happy.

RESOURCES:

- Sustainable Landscape and Gardens: Good Science-Practical Application, Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott, Washington State University, 2009
- Gardening With Ed Hume, Ed Hume, Sasquatch Books, 2008
- The American Horticulture Society Northwest Smart Garden Guide, Peter Runzi, DK Publishing, 2003