



Gardening mistakes yield respect for nature

You probably don't realize it, but as an extension agent, I have made a lot of gardening mistakes. And believe it or not, those have provided the best lessons. I want to share some of these with you, and some might seem so painfully obvious that you may ask, "How could you?" while others may cause you to think twice.

When starting a garden, the first thing to do is select a suitable site. I learned that a site that gets six hours of sunlight in spring may not get six hours of sunlight in the fall, if there is shade to the south of the garden. From my many mistakes, I have learned to select my garden site based on two seasons of planting, keeping in mind that over the years, trees get bigger and the garden that was sunny five years ago may now be shaded by some large trees.

Garden planning goes out the window a lot of times when we start thinking of starting a garden. Form always seems to give way to function, and we end up feeling the pinch later. Take, for example, when we made our garden at the Extension office. We placed the garden gates closer to the road because we thought that would be better for people entering the garden. Unfortunately, it was a mistake because it meant materials such as mulch, compost, etc., would have to be hauled over a longer distance, as they must be delivered to the side of the garden fence.

When spring rolls around, it seems like we all get into a frenzy to start planting and we go out and buy seedlings and seeds of all sorts — usually way too many — and then try to plant them all in the small garden space, ignoring all rules of spacing. We end up with plants that must compete with each other for light and nutrients and develop a massive pest and disease problem. The lesson I learned is not to try to grow everything I like in a small space, and to know my limitations.

The planting of trap crops to aid in insect control has become very popular. But if they are not planted well ahead of the main crop, then they are just beautiful but ineffective plants around a pest infested garden. Trap crops must be started long before the garden crops, and this all goes back to planning. Trap crops must also be planted in succession to ensure that they are around for the duration of the garden crops.

Some of us have a hard time letting go of things, and sometimes we also hold on to our plants a little too long. We keep tomatoes long after their useful — holding onto plants that are producing only a couple of pest-infested fruits — while using water and nutrients that could be channeled into another crop, or even a cover crop for soil building.

One of the worst things you can do as a gardener is to produce a good crop, but not harvest in a timely manner, thus losing the produce to pests, disease, and over-maturity. This is often the case with okra and eggplant.

I have also made some crucial errors by delaying pest control. By waiting to see a high stink bug population before I start treatment, I have ended up giving an entire crop to those stinking pests. I now understand the importance of regular scouting and quick response treatment.

Over the years I have tried many different techniques to try and keep some of my peppers through the winter, but at the start of spring, I realize that going against Mother Nature is never a good idea. Though well intentioned, if these plants do make it, they never produce adequately to merit the effort to keep them alive. The lesson learned "work with Mother Nature, not against her."

As a gardener, one should learn to trust his or her instincts; if ever you get that urge to plant a little early, just do it. I find that it is worth the risk, because if you win you get ahead of the bugs, and if you lose, the worst case scenario is you have to replant.

Patience, humility, and a deep respect for nature are some of the virtues that I have earned from my gardening mistakes.

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Trevor Hylton

ABOVE: Be sure to give plants enough space when planting in the garden.

TOP LEFT: Plant trap crops, such as sunflowers, before planting main crops. Sunflowers attract leaf-footed bugs, keeping them off the main crop.

MOLLY JAMESON



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