



# Plan to Avoid Garden Problems

Many garden problems can be reduced or avoided altogether by thinking ahead. Give your plants the conditions they require and they will reward you by looking good, producing well, and resisting diseases and insect attacks. Here are some tips to help you. For more detailed information, contact the Master Gardeners (see box on last page).

**Know your garden conditions.** What type of soil do you have? Which areas have full sun, which are generally shady, which get sun in summer and shade in winter? How much summer watering are you prepared to do?

**Match up plants with your garden conditions.** Before buying plants or building a new garden bed, investigate the needs of the plants. Do they require sun or shade? Do they need particularly good drainage? Do they require high acid soil?

**Avoid disease-prone varieties.** Find out before you buy plants if the plant you want to grow is generally subject to diseases when grown in this area. If so, see if disease-resistant varieties are available.

**Get healthy plants.** Examine plants when buying them. Look for healthy green foliage and strong stems. Learn to recognize the signs of diseases and insect damage.

See if the plant is root-bound (the roots have reached the container and have started to grow around the outside of the root ball or through the drainage holes). If you decide to buy it even if it is root-bound, it will be necessary to unravel the roots or score the root ball to encourage the roots to grow outward. Check the color of the roots; they should be white, moist, and crisp.

If you propagate your own plants from cuttings, be sure that the parent plant is disease-free.

**Group plants by their watering and drainage requirements.** Many problems are caused by over-watering or under-watering. Trying to grow plants that demand constant watering alongside plants that need dry conditions means trouble.

**Water correctly.** Among the most common reasons for plant problems are too much water and too little water. Symptoms of these opposite problems can appear similar – a plant will wilt when it has too much water as well as when it has too little.

When watering, be sure that the water gets to the root zone. Probe the ground to a depth of about a foot (a long screw driver or a piece of re-bar works well). You will be able to feel when the ground is hard and dry.

If your method of watering gets the foliage wet, water early in the day so that the foliage is dry before evening. The combination of moisture and cool temperatures encourages problems.

If you do not already use drip irrigation, do consider it to conserve water and to put the water only where needed.

**Mulch.** In the winter, mulch will help to keep the soil from getting compacted by the rain pounding on it. In the summer, it will keep the soil from drying out and turning into concrete. An organic mulch will slowly break down and add nutrients to the soil, thus feeding the soil, and therefore, the plants. Additionally, mulch will help to keep weeds down.

Apply shredded bark or other organic materials on the soil surface to a depth of at least 3 to 4. Keep mulch at least several inches away from the base of each plant. For trees, the recommended distance is 1 foot from the root crown.

If your shrubs and trees are free of pests and diseases, you can let them "self-mulch" by simply not removing fallen leaves and litter.

**Control weeds.** Weeds compete with your garden plants for water and nutrients. Hoe or pull by hand the weeds between your plants. They will be easiest to control when they are small, so weed frequently, especially in the spring when everything is growing fast.

If you have perennial weeds such as bindweed, delay planting perennials and shrubs until the weeds are under control. Hoeing and hand-pulling perennial weeds may not solve the problem, since many of these will propagate themselves from parts of the plants that you leave behind. Sheet mulching is a method for killing these weeds before you plant a new garden area.

If you decide to use a weed killer, be sure to read the label instructions and handle it carefully.

**Protect your plants from animal pests.** Use bird net to protect seedlings and fruit. If gophers are a problem in your area, plant in gopher baskets or in raised beds lined with hardware cloth. If you see gopher holes around your garden, you may want to trap or poison the gophers.

Keep deer out of the garden with a high fence, or protect individual trees or shrubs with a cage made of fencing material. If deer are a problem in your area and you don't want to (or cannot) fence, choose plants that are not attractive to deer. (A list of such plants is available from the Master Gardeners.) Be prepared to see some deer damage even if you try to have only deer resistant plants; if the deer are hungry enough, they will eat practically any plant.

**Keep your garden cleaned up.** Get rid of any diseased or insect-infested plant parts that you remove from (or that fall off) your plants.

Some diseases can only be treated by cutting out the affected portions of the plant. If you have to remove diseased branches or stems, be sure that you cut back to healthy plant tissue.

**Don't poison your plants by accident.** If you use an herbicide, reserve a sprayer for it which you do not use for other garden sprays. Put a big, easy-to-see label on it.

Try to use non-poisonous methods of pest control. If you feel that you must use a pesticide, look for a product that is non-toxic to humans and that breaks down quickly. Read the label and follow the directions carefully. Use the recommended amount of the product. Using pesticides carelessly may hurt you and others as well as your plants.

Search the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program website for the UC IPM quick note on "Less Toxic Pesticides".

**Don't overfeed your plants.** Before applying fertilizer or plant food, consider whether you need it. Giving your plants lots of nitrogen will result in lush growth that is very attractive to insects and other pests.

Adding compost to your soil benefits the microorganisms in the soil, and the microorganisms make the nutrients the soil available to the plants. (The mulch you apply to keep down weeds will gradually break down into compost.)

**Examine your garden for problems regularly.** Most problems are easier to handle if you catch them early. Treat the small problems before they become big ones. If a plant doesn't look right to you but you don't know what's wrong, bring a sample of the affected part to a Master Gardener.

For help with your garden problems, call the Master Gardener hotline at 565-2608 or visit the Master Gardener information desk in the University of California Cooperative Extension office (133 Aviation Blvd., # 109, Santa Rosa), or ask a Master Gardener at your local farmers market or the Sonoma County Fair or other event. See our website at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/scmg/> for additional publications.

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