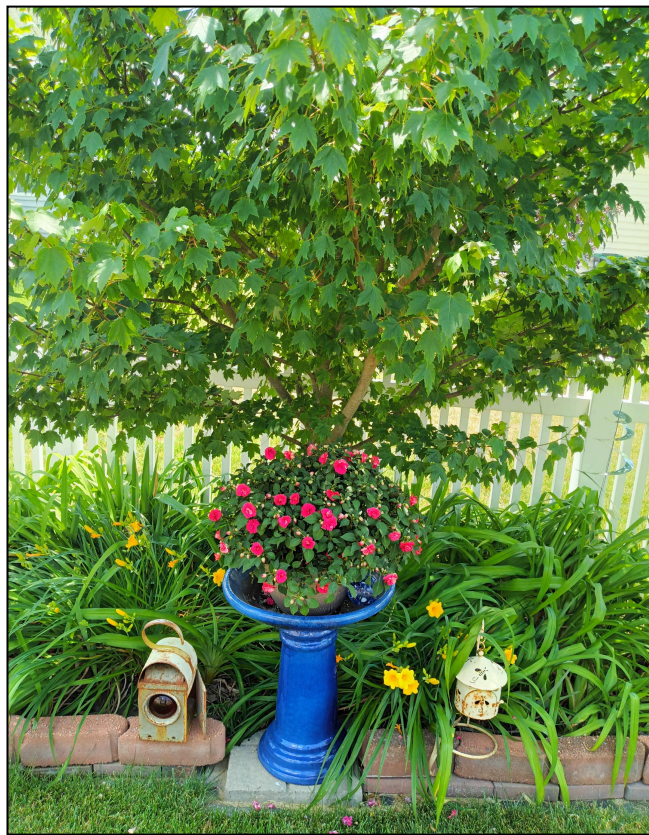




Old Time Gardening In A New Age

by Kent County Master Gardener Faith Loper

During World War II, my father served as a Merchant Marine and a “Victory Garden” enthusiast. His homegrown gardening skills enabled him to convert nutrient depleted earth into naturally enriched topsoil. Plants and produce grown in his bountiful yard,



Kent County Master Gardener Faith Loper Photo

Old Style garden using bird bath as a focal point.

So, we must address soil preparation and conditions in order to realize a bountiful yield. Let us nail down a few penny saving discoveries and strategies.

beautified the community, fed families and stimulated my interest in natural soil reconditioning.

Over the years many have questioned old homespun gardening tips and tricks. This article will attempt to shed light on “good trouble” gardening issues. The challenges that can be faced and worked around, through earthy gardening approaches will be shared. My personal “Master Gardener” always said, “Begin with the end in mind.”

Composting

Creating “Black Gold”

Compost is a good way of adding nutrients to the soil while improving texture. It is the natural process of recycling organic matter. This transformation is accomplished by decomposing living organisms. Backyard composting is fairly easy if you have four weeks or up to a year to wait. The process is based on the utilization of kitchen waste and garden refuse.

Composting ingredients fall into two categories: Browns (carbon) and Greens (nitrogen). Browns are dry materials such as dead leaves and newspapers, and Greens are moist, fresh food scraps including kitchen waste, that does not include meats or fats.

The homespun notion of creating a compost pile has been used for centuries. My father called the end product of nutrient rich and dense soil “Black Gold”.

Composting in place, also called trench composting, was more common in previous generations. With this method holes or trenches were dug, then filled with all kinds of things from the kitchen and yard. This hassle-free method was an easy way to enrich your soil without the unsightly view of a compost pile in your backyard. My father

Late Winter Preparations for Spring Gardening

Late winter continues to be a great time to launch preparations for the upcoming spring. An early start assists in reducing the stress of having to complete so many pre-season chores. My father made a checklist as he walked the lawn and garden. Together we inspected trees and shrubs for broken limbs and other winter damage. Note-taking helps to organize the workload for cleanup, pruning, planting, and general enhancement of staging areas, walkways, fences, tools, etc.

Spring Preparations

Knowing your plant hardiness zone provides a better idea of when to plant and or anticipate frost. A comprehensive preparation plan also helps to maximize your garden time, planting, space and successive planting. The trick is to stagger projected plant blooms so that when one plant exhausts its beauty another explodes in living color.

At our homestead, ornamental beds included rows of seasonal flowers such as tulips, daffodils, iris, and other fairly self-sustaining plants. As I walked the sizable property, I can still hear my garden mentor saying, "Know your plant's history, their required soil and special care issues."

It cannot be overstated that soil preparation is the very foundation upon which all gardens grow. Good soil not only anchors a plant, but supplies nutrients, water and oxygen. Simply stated: healthy soil means healthy plants.

Early spring is the best time to prepare for the upcoming season. Most developmental growth occurs during this time, so amending the soil with nutrients would be most beneficial. Dressing the lawn and yard must also be considered. My father would check for bare spots in ornamental beds where mulch may have shifted. And as needed, added an inch or two of mulch around trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. Naturally, autumn leaves had to be cleared away, as the foliage on bulbs emerged. His final preparation was to stake out imagined planting areas and transplanting of perennials.

Container Preparation

Once upon a time, gardeners did little more than add fresh compost to the tired soil remaining in the unwashed container. It goes without saying that in this regard I disagree. Sanitizing pots by scrubbing them inside and out is the way to go. Once dried, a natural and organic potting soil mix and fertilizer are added. Potting soil is recommended rather than garden soil because of the possibility of pests and diseases. The use of containers with holes in the bottom for drainage is essential for keeping roots healthy.

The use of foliage in containers has been underrated. Foliage continues to provide color, contrast and texture even after flowering. Strangely, my father refused to purchase ornamental

placed his compost pile in a remote corner of the yard. I prefer a lid-covered compost bin of coffee grinds, tea bags, egg shells, fruit and vegetable waste, and yard clippings.

References

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Composting at Home" [2.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home](https://www2.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home)

U.S. State Cooperative Extension System. nifa.usda.gov/extension.org

Seed matters.org

Plants Database, U.S. Department of Agriculture. [Plants.usda.gov/java](https://plants.usda.gov/java)

Delaware Gardening Challenge to Newcomers. [Udel.edu](https://udel.edu) Questions

Questions

For questions on this subject or any gardening topic call the Master Gardener Helpline: In New Castle County, (302) 831-8862; in Kent County, (302) 730-4000; and in Sussex County, (302) 856-2585 x 535. The Master Gardeners monitor the Helpline in the winter but it may take a few days to get back to you.



pots and containers for his yard. He would however, display the most beautiful flowers in recycled old drums and barrels.

I love container gardening. My collection of unique containers ranges from old clay pots to terracotta and ceramics. Well positioned containers showcase my colorful flowers and vegetables. They bring pizzazz to my porches and walkways.

Vegetable Gardening

Traditional ground level gardening continues to be a good option when space, water access and unwanted animal guests are not a problem. However, the current trend toward smaller lots has helped popularize the raised bed garden. The elevated garden seemingly improves soil mixing, drainage, planting and protection from animals. Vining vegetable plants such as cucumbers, and tomatoes allow greater yields from less space. My father utilized companion planting in his large garden.

Companion planting - the art and science of pairing compatible plants - continues to be useful. The concept has been passed down through many generations of backyard farmers. They used compatible plant pairing to actually create a healthier and more productive vegetable garden.

Seed Saving and Sharing

There was a time when flowers and vegetable seeds were not purchased at a “big box store.” Seeds were distributed by farmers and gardeners who grew and harvested plants and seeds. During my formative years I observed my father selecting suitable plants for seed harvesting and storage. His efforts actually established a living link to the past.

A Closing Thought

Today’s “box store” gardeners can learn much from the Master Gardeners of yesterday. Their folksy ways and real time discoveries actually established the foundation of science-based gardening. The wisdom of our guardian influencers will resonate throughout time. It has been said that nothing will last forever. We expect annuals to last but one glorious season, and perennials to reincarnate yearly-not endlessly. The garden talks and walks with my father will last forever.

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UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website- <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>

