

In Your Own Backyard:

Sustainable Gardening Tips from a Seasoned Amateur

By Michael Jehn

Spring is a season of renewal and freshness, surprises and newly emerging forms, the return of hibernating and migratory wildlife. It can also be a time of uncertainty and intimidation to the inexperienced gardener. The yearly evolution of a bare, colorless yard into a lush space bursting with color and texture can seem like nothing short of magic. But, with the right blend of determination and passion—and these home-tested tips—anyone can become a skilled nurturer of thriving plant life.

What to plant

Are you just beginning to explore an interest in gardening and are unsure what to grow? Don't be afraid to experiment as you learn what works well under different sets of habitat conditions. You'll discover which plants thrive in sunshine or shade, dry soil or saturated. Try not to be discouraged if your early efforts fail.

Consider combining reliable, hardy species like azalea, rhododendron, roses, creeping juniper, false cypress (*chamaecyparis*), japonica shrubs, lilac, Japanese barberry and yews with perennials like hostas, Asiatic lilies, northern sea oats, gladioli and astilbe. This variety of plants, paired with rocks, pea

gravel, and mulch, creates depth and visual interest. Adding evergreens can anchor a yard and provide color through the winter.

The proliferation of urban farming in Pittsburgh is a reminder of the values and practices associated with agriculture—and of our ability to grow our own food! Tomatoes, sweet and hot peppers and wild onions are popular local choices. Mint and other herbs also grow well here—so well, in fact, you'll want to use a container to prevent them overtaking the rest of your gardening efforts.

Think of yourself as being in a partnership with nature: molding spaces with allowance for nature's own purpose rather than coercing order.

How to plant

Always follow recommended instructions for seeds or potted plants that you purchase. Be mindful of frost conditions, especially with vulnerable seeds or seedlings.

With shrubs and trees, one of the most important—and easily ignored—steps is proper preparation of the hole. Dig deep enough to allow the roots to spread

as they grow. Refill the hole with amended soil, a combination of soil taken from the original hole and organic compost, potting soil or fertilizer.

Composting

Diverting organic trash to your garden is a satisfying and sustainable practice. It's also one of the easiest ways to recycle! Composted material makes for a remarkably rich soil for gardening, and you'll save money buying fewer bags of potting soil.

There are many composting methods that can be bought or built on your own, from a simple open pile or specially designed bin to utilizing suspended barrel-shaped tumbler models with handles designed for regular churning of the contents.

Water collection

Rain barrels are storm water management tools that can also provide the water you need for gardening. These plastic bins collect and store water from your roof, reducing the rainwater that enters the waterways and helping to mitigate flooding.

squirrel hill feature

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