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Yard trick: 3 tips for a successful landscape

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Several gardening blunders have taken on “perennial” traits in our landscapes. Regardless of the reasons for this phenomenon, the rule should always be: Take advice from those who know. University of Missouri Extension bases its advice on unbiased, accurate research. Here are three tips you can count on when deciding what to do in your yard this year.

1. Don’t volcano-mulch. This term describes the harmful practice of piling mounds of mulch around tree trunks. You don’t have to look far to find a tree that has been smothered by an inexperienced landscaper this spring. Hear this now—volcano mulching kills trees!

   Normally, tree bark does an adequate job of preventing disease and insect damage. A pile of water-holding mulch, however, softens the bark and makes it an easier target for wood-rotting fungi and insects. Furthermore, diminished oxygen levels below the pile bring roots to the surface where they can be damaged by summer drought.

   Mulch in place of grass around a tree can prevent trunk damage from lawn equipment, however. It also reduces root competition with your lawn. Just be sure it is no more than one to two inches deep and there is no mulch in contact with the trunk.

2. Take care of your soil. So much of plant health has to do with what is going on under your feet. Yet, many make no connection between soil quality and plant performance.

   Whether you are troubleshooting a problem spot in your lawn or thinking about some new plantings, get your soil tested first.

   University of Missouri Extension provides this service. Our recommendations will tell you if the pH is too high or low, what the nutrient levels are like, and if you have adequate organic matter. These factors can make a big difference.

   Collect the sample with a shovel, auger, or soil probe. Take 8 to 10 samples from the area you want to use for planting, and mix them together. Do this at a depth of 3 inches for lawns and 6 inches for everything else. We’ll need two cups of air-dried soil to run the test.

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With spring’s arrival, many people yearn to start a small garden. Enjoying in-season fresh produce from your own garden can improve your health and stretch your food dollars. Even if you don’t plant your own garden, you’ll benefit from eating more fresh produce from a local farmer’s market or the neighborhood grocery store.

**Health benefits**

- **Eating more fruits and vegetables has health benefits.** Fruits and vegetables are an important source of fiber, Vitamin C, Vitamin A and folic acid. Most Americans do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, eating only one or two servings a day, rather than the recommended 7 to 11 servings daily. One serving equals one small piece of fruit, ½ cup cooked or chopped fruit or vegetable, or 1 cup of salad greens.

- **Consuming more produce provides more needed fiber for your diet.** Although half of Americans focus on fiber when reading nutrition labels, only one out of five Americans eats the recommended amount of fiber: 30 grams per day for men and 25 grams per day for women. Only plant foods like vegetables, fruit and whole grains provide fiber. Meat, dairy foods and fats contain no fiber.

- **Fiber-rich foods can help lower blood cholesterol, lower blood pressure and reduce risk of heart disease.** Fruits like apples and oranges, peas, dry beans, carrots, flaxseed, oats and barley are good sources of soluble fiber. Other fiber-rich foods like vegetables, whole grains, bran and nuts absorb water, helping prevent constipation. Fiber has been shown to help prevent hemorrhoids and reduce risk of irritable bowel syndrome and diverticular disease. Because individuals eating plenty of fiber from vegetables, fruits and whole grains are at lower risk of getting life-threatening diseases like heart disease, cancer and diabetes, they tend to live longer.

- **Fiber can improve blood-sugar levels and reduce risk of type 2 diabetes.** By slowing absorption of sugars in the diet, fiber can help people with diabetes manage their blood-sugar levels. High-fiber diets can reduce blood-glucose levels up to 30 percent.

- **Fiber slows the time it takes for your stomach to empty, so you feel full longer.** Fiber fills you up, not out. Individuals eating plenty of fiber-rich vegetables and whole grains tend to consume fewer calories and reach a healthy weight more easily.

- **Fiber may help prevent some forms of cancer, like small bowel cancer.** The benefit of preventing colon cancer is uncertain.

- **Gardening offers an opportunity to enjoy fresh air and increase physical activity.** Moving more burns calories.

**Financial benefits**

- **Eating more fresh produce from your own garden or the local farmer’s market can stretch your food dollars.** Food is always at its cheapest when plentiful.

- **Gardening provides produce at its peak nutritional value at just pennies a serving.** Gardens can easily provide lettuce, radishes, peas, spinach, carrots, green beans, eggplant, tomatoes, bell peppers, jalapeno peppers and onions for the family table. Sweet corn and potatoes require a bit more growing space. Extra can be canned or frozen or shared with family members or food pantries. In-season produce can add fresh flavors to snacks and meals.
How to de-stress in changing times

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I’ve been hearing many people talk about the stress in their lives related to family, job, finances, etc. Recently I saw an article by Doc Childre on the Internet that addresses this issue and will share some of his points.

We seem to be in a period of rapidly changing times, which can make personal challenges even more difficult. It is not uncommon for us to become overwhelmed with stress, which then limits our capacity to cope. It may be a lengthy process to figure out how to reduce stress, but it is important for us to stay as physically and emotionally healthy as possible while we navigate through these difficult challenges.

Several practices can help us reduce stress and move forward as we deal with stressful issues.

- **Communicate and interact with others.** Share your feelings with someone, or even a group of people, who are going through similar experiences. Whether you are crying or laughing together, collective support can help lift your spirits, which in turn can release stress buildup.

- **Open your heart.** When in crisis, it is normal for people to “shut down” their heart feelings due to thoughts of shock, anger, fear and despair. While this is understandable, it is also important to have compassion for yourself. Try to reopen your heart feelings. One way might be to offer kindness and support to others in need. Even small acts of kindness and compassion can help you reestablish your footing and reduce stress that can affect your health. Much stress can be reduced by caring for and interacting with others.

- **Express appreciation and gratitude.** Every day, send genuine feelings of appreciation to someone or something—children, family members, pets or others. The practice of appreciation and gratitude has been proven to help people reconnect with feelings of hope.

- **Practice heart-focused breathing.** Breathe while imagining your breath passing in and out through your heart area or the center of your chest. Envision yourself as taking time to refuel your system by breathing in an attitude of calm and balance. At other times, you may substitute with breathing the feeling of appreciation, compassion, or any other positive feeling you may choose. This can be done in a quiet place or while walking, jogging or eventually in a conversation with others. This technique is being taught throughout the world and can be very helpful in reducing anxiety and anger.

- **Get plenty of sleep.** Stress can make it harder to sleep, but sleep is especially important in times of crisis. Get what sleep you can. Try not to overdramatize your concerns about it, which can only make it worse. Breathing an attitude of calm and relaxation for five minutes or so before bed has helped many people get more restful sleep. While some people may require sleep medications in certain situations, others may tend to overmedicate in the pursuit of quick fixes. Check out alternative methods in case something simple helps.

- **Exercise regularly.** People often don’t want to exercise when feeling stressed. Yet exercise can help clear the fog and tension accumulated from anxiety, anger and worry. Exercise won’t take away your reasons for getting stressed, but it strengthens your capacity to manage it.

- **Don’t blame yourself.** It doesn’t help to replay thoughts of things you could have done differently. We all have been caught off guard by unexpected changes. Moving forward is easier without carrying baggage about what you could have or should have done. Be easy on yourself.

Yard trick: 3 tips for a successful landscape  (Continued from page 1)

Visit [extension.missouri.edu/ecregion](https://extension.missouri.edu/ecregion) for a list of locations to take the samples in East Central Missouri. (In St. Louis, a second drop-off site is now available at Sugar Creek Gardens in Kirkwood.) The cost for the soil test varies but is $20 or less. You’ll receive test results 10 days to two weeks after submitting the soil sample.

3. **Buy for quality, not quantity.** The business of growing and selling landscape plants is very competitive. Weather places tough constraints on the success of growers and retailers alike. The temptation to reduce quality to increase profits is ever-present.

   Unfortunately, consumers don’t always detect compromises in plant quality. To save on labor, trees are often planted too deep in their containers. As a result, often less than half the volume of the container is actually occupied by roots. Insect and disease problems are also common but are unnoticeable to the average consumer.

   That is why I recommend buying plants from those whose livelihood depends on it. Businesses selling plants as a seasonal supplement to their “regular” products have less incentive to ensure customer success and are less likely to have knowledgeable horticulture staff. The next time you purchase plants, consider that a few extra dollars might mean the difference between short-lived fiscal health and long-term plant health.

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**HOME & GARDEN**

6 ideas for controlling clutter

1. **Go through your mail daily.** Sort out the good stuff. Recycle junk mail, newspapers and magazines.
2. **Be careful of accepting “freebies.”** Although tempting, those free pens, mugs and hand-me-downs from family can pile up fast.
3. **When you buy new, get rid of the old.** Donate or throw out broken equipment, appliances and electronics.
4. **Pare down mementos.** Taking photographs on vacations is a good way to develop memories and eliminate possessions.
5. **Set aside 15 minutes every day to de-clutter.** Focus on clearing items from tables and counters.
6. **Ask friends and family to help.** Sometimes we need a push from others to make critical decisions on what to save and what to throw out. Donate unused items to local charities.

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*LifeTimes* is written by University of Missouri Extension specialists for individuals and families in East Central Missouri. This newsletter is provided by your county Extension Council.

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