

Dishing the Dirt: Advice from a Master Gardener

Think "right plant/right place" in planning your garden

A garden can be a place of pride and joy, a retreat or sanctuary, especially when well planned. By considering "right plant/right place," you can create a successful, beautiful garden with healthier, longer living plants that require less maintenance, less water, and ultimately less cost. There are three main parts to this system: Assessment, Planning and Plant Selection.

ASSESSMENT starts with learning your **Hardiness Zone**. This can be found on the [USDA website](#) by entering in your ZIP code. Hardiness Zone is used by gardeners and growers to tell you the minimum temperature a plant is likely to survive. Plants rated "hardy to Zone 9," for instance, would not survive the winter in Zone 6. The lower the zone number, the colder the winters.



Salvias are mostly full sun plants. (6)

- Next observe the **sunlight** in your garden over the course of a full day, making note of which areas get sun, part sun, shade and full shade. Full sun areas get six or more hours of sun a day. Four to six hours is part sun. Less than four hours is shade. "Full" shade gets zero sun and can be found behind a structure or very dense shrubs.
- Specific spots in your garden may also have **microclimates**: areas that are inconsistent with the rest of the property because they are influenced by conditions in your yard. For example, an area near the foundation that gets warmth from the house may let you successfully place a plant with a higher Hardiness Zone. Before the leaves fill out, a deciduous tree may allow you to grow spring-flowering bulbs, followed by hostas for the summer shade. A dense evergreen planted in a sunny front yard creates a microclimate that can allow a part-sun or shade plant to thrive.
- Now look at your **soil**. Is it dense clay, grainy sand or loamy? The perfect time to amend your soil is before planting. Sandy soils drain well but may not be able to hold enough water for thirsty plants. Clay soils are dense and may be too heavy for delicate roots. By amending your soil you can provide a mix that holds water, minerals and nutrients and drains well. Getting a soil test done will help determine the condition of your soil and what nutrients it needs. (See our website for information on [soil testing resources](#).)

PLANNING involves determining your garden's use and style. Is there a style of garden you like? Cottage style, Mediterranean, or Japanese?

- How much time will you have to maintain your garden? A perennial garden requires more time and effort than a garden of grasses or flowering shrubs.



• • How you want to water trees and shrubs is an important consideration in planning your garden. Drip irrigation is one possible solution. (7)

- Is there a favorite color or two that you want to incorporate?
- Where are your high traffic areas and pet runs?
- Where is your water source? It is better to plan ahead than have to lug watering cans.
- Planting native plants often decreases the need for care and watering.
- Many gardens are planned with higher maintenance plants placed nearer the home and less demanding native plants as you travel away from the home.
- A plot plan of your property or space is a good way to start to plan your overall design.
- Remember to incorporate hardscape (paths, sidewalks and patios) and seating areas.

Finally it's time for **PLANT SELECTION**. Once you have an understanding of your garden space you can choose your plants.

- Plant tags are a good place to start and often include information on plant Hardiness Zone, color, size, spread, mature height and sun requirements. Knowing about your plant will help you to place it in a spot where it will thrive.
- Knowing how big a plant, shrub or tree will get when mature will keep you from wishing later that you had planned better. Many plants are available in dwarf varieties. A tree or shrub

that has a mature spread of 6 feet will not look or perform well when planted one foot from the foundation. A rule of thumb is to plant trees and shrubs half the distance of their mature spread, i.e., in the case of our 6' diameter example, that would be 3' from the foundation



- • Trees planted too close to your home can cause a variety of problems. (8)

- or neighboring shrubs.
- Planting a tree or shrub in your sun garden that is going to get large may require you to move or replace neighboring plants in a few years. Often planting short-lived annuals (plants that live for only one season) in these areas can bridge the time until your garden matures.
- Remember to plant shade plants in shady areas and sun lovers in sunny spots.
- Garden statuary, trellises or planters can also add interest and focal points to a new garden space.

Do your homework: your plants will thank you for it with repeated lush leaves, lovely blooms and longer lives.

Principal Master Gardener Doris Sheils has been a member of the MMGA since 2008. She volunteers on the association's Boston Flower

& Garden Show Committee and at Mass Hort's Elm Bank campus, as well as on the telephone Help Line. She recently also opened her Woburn garden for a tour by fellow MGs. Adding to her accomplishments, Doris just earned a certificate in Botanical Art & Illustration from Wellesley College. Her artwork was displayed at the Gardens at Elm Bank earlier this year.