

25 Tips and Skills to Make You a Better Gardener

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You may already be an outstanding gardener, but you can better your skills by discovering things you did not know. Countless resources are available to give you sound, science based gardening tips.

1. Be observant. Study what is going on in your yard throughout the year. Notice textures, colors, sun aspect, microclimates, wind direction, leaf shapes, plant structure and other characteristics. Take photographs!
2. Know your soil. It is difficult to change your soil type. Adding sand to clay will not give you sandy loam. Do a 'feel' test by squeezing a small handful of dirt and making a ribbon with your thumb and middle finger to gauge soil structure. Determine pH and fertility with a soil test. Ideal soil has about 5% organic matter. Higher percentage is not better. Add organic mulch regularly to improve both soil structure and fertility.
3. Know your USDA climate zone for cold hardiness. This is not the whole weather picture. Skagit County zones range from 8A in Anacortes to 5B in Rockport. Whidbey Island and Anacortes have a windy oceanic climate affected by their close proximity to Puget Sound. Mount Vernon is considered to have a Mediterranean climate- dry summers and cool moist winters.
4. Deal with drought. It's a reality. Despite 8 months of cool damp weather summer often brings periods of up to 80 days with little rain. Chose sturdy plants that are adapted to these conditions and group them together by their water needs.
5. Mulch is a must! Black plastic is a no-no! Soil needs air. Organic mulch keeps soil cool and moist in the summer and warmer in the winter. It helps limit weeds and controls erosion. It reduces compaction and encourages beneficial organisms.
6. Buy good plants. Resist the urge to 'rescue' a sickly plant. Check the roots to see if they are healthy and not pot bound. Despite how much TLC you administer, an unhealthy plant will never perform as well as a plant that is healthy to begin with. Don't waste your time, energy or money.
7. Invest in good pruners that fit your hand and keep them sharp. Solid construction with heavy duty bypass steel blades and a comfortable grip are essential. Good tools will last for years if you take care of them.
Best book on Pruning is Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning-3rd edition
8. Recognize suckers and water sprouts. Suckers come from the base of the tree and are often the result of a disturbed root system or come the understock of a grafted plant. Water sprouts are those young whip-like stems that straight up on mature branches. Both should be snapped or cut off cleanly at their base.
9. Sharpen a shovel. It will make your work so much easier. Clamp the clean shovel in a vise with the blade up facing you. Start at one edge using a 8-10 inch bastard file and push it toward the center of the shovel, holding it at a 45 degree angle. Work toward the center of the shovel, then move to the other side and repeat. Do not sharpen the back of the shovel. The bevel is on one side only.
10. Dig a \$50 hole. Dig a hole twice the width of the root ball. This encourages roots to spread out into surrounding native soil. The hole should only be the depth of

- the root ball so that the crown doesn't stick up and dry out, nor not so deep that water puddles around the crown causing it to rot. Refill with the SAME you dug out of the hole and don't add amendments to the hole. Water well to lightly compact the soil (no stomping) and add a 3 inch layer of organic mulch. Water regularly until established, as long as 2 or 3 years for some trees. Do not stake unless absolutely necessary and then only for 6 months or less.
11. Promote mycorrhizae. These unseen fungi, a plant's best friend, act as an extension of the plant's roots to help them take up the nutrients and water, fend off disease and improve soil structure. You can help by NOT adding excess fertilizers and pesticides. Excess phosphorus actually kills mycorrhizae.
 12. Manage weeds. Get'em while they are little before they set seed and get the entire root. Use mulch to suppress them (prevent germination) .
 13. Identify it before you squash it. Learn to recognize good bugs from bad. Buy an insect identification guide or look online at an integrated pest-management (IPM) site such as www.ipmimages.org.
 14. Deadhead. Cut off spent blossoms to prevent plant from going to seed. In most cases this forces that plant into second round of bloom and your plants will look neater. In the fall, leave seed heads on for winter food for birds.
 15. Space plants properly. Give plants room to grow. Read those plant tags. It's take patience but your reward is healthier plants and less pruning. Does not apply to container planting.
 16. Water wisely. Roots need the water. Soaker hoses or drip irrigation put the water where it is needed. Group plants by need.
 17. Pinch an annual. Taking away some new growth back to a node where 2 new stems emerge will give you a stronger, bushier plant with more blooms.
 18. Attract beneficial wildlife. Encourage birds, frogs, and pollinators to take up residence in your yard. Choose a variety of plants that provide food sources and water. Planting in layers provides different heights for hunting, nesting, foraging.
 19. Read plant tags. A wealth of information to help you succeed. Learn what those symbols mean. Right plant, right place
 20. Succeed with succulents. Give them excellent drainage and these small, hardy, low maintenance gems will last for years.
 21. Edge a bed. Nothing makes a yard look neater than a nice crisp edge along the borders.
 22. Rejuvenate an old shrub. An overgrown or neglected multi-stem shrub, such as forsythia, can be cut back to the ground in late winter or early spring. Remove 1/3 of the largest, oldest stems at ground level each year for 3 years.
 23. To till or not to till? Don't. Tilling destroys soil structure and stirs up dormant weed seeds. Can compact the soil below the reach of the blades.
 24. Enhance what you love. Improve the places you're most likely to look at. Other people will, too. ACE
 - A- Assess what needs attention
 - C. Clean up clutter and other distractions
 - E. Enhance the strong points.
 - Clean up your landscape such as sweeping patio, put a pot over stains, remove eye sores such as deadwood, dead flowers

25. Contact your local WSU Master Gardener office for local gardening information or go to <http://gardening.wsu.edu>