



Successful Gardening in 5 Easy Steps

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

I could write a book about the things my husband and I have done wrong since buying a “*place in the country*” six years ago. We had a blank slate except for one hundred and forty four tall Italian Cypress trees. But, I want to tell you the five most important things we have done right to turn a practically barren landscape into many lush flower gardens.



Number 1: Develop a plan

OK, we never really had an overall plan, but in hindsight I wish we had. I recommend that it be the first thing you do. We just started making one flowerbed at a time without really thinking about water and maintenance for the whole property over the long run and we had to take things out and move them here and there. The plan should indicate areas of shade, sun, and morning sun only, and then appropriate plants selected for those areas. You need a definite plan for irrigation whether drip, overhead or popup sprinkler systems and a timer system to schedule irrigations. Try to avoid dragging hoses and watering manually.

Number 2: Know what your soil is like and amend it if necessary

We knew that our soil was alkaline and compacted. As such it did not sustain earthworms. Therefore, the second most important thing, which we did do, was to incorporate composted steer manure into every new flowerbed we created. This added necessary organic matter and nutrients to aid in plant growth and helped with moisture retention. Then, out of nowhere, earthworms appeared! We knew other beneficial soil creatures were active when we saw the earthworms.

Number 3: Group plants with similar light, water and nutrient requirements

We purchased annuals, perennials, vines, roses, many bushes and small trees with little thought to each of their water requirements. What were we thinking? We had some automatic sprinklers but not nearly enough to water each plant. We are still attempting to get irrigation under control. We have eliminated several “thirsty” plants and replaced them with more drought tolerant, sun loving varieties. We have included many native grasses and ornamentals. We have a lot of garden space so we like that many of our annuals, such as cosmos, sunflowers, daisies, coneflowers and many others, self seed freely every year.



Number 4: Mulch everywhere!

This really should be number one because it is so important! Wood chips, compost, leaves or any organic matter will work. Mulch helps prevent soil compaction caused by watering and foot traffic. Try to stay off those flowerbeds! Mulching aids moisture retention and prevents most weeds from germinating. The gradual decay of organic matter allows nutrients to infiltrate into the soil, mix with irrigation water, and be taken up by plant roots.

Number 5: Protect the beneficial insects and use pesticides judiciously

Don't panic when you spot an insect on your favorite flower or a spider on the ground. The chances are very good they are looking for a plant destroying insect to have for lunch. We have eliminated fungicides and insecticides from our farm. When we see aphids on a rose we know that when we come back in 24 hours, the rose will be nearly free of infestation because of our brigade of beneficial insects. Ladybird beetles, Lacewings, Syrphid flies and tiny wasps are hard at work looking for a bad bug to consume or parasitize. When you try to poison the aphids, then all those good guys die also. You might solve the immediate aphid problem but you will adversely affect the equilibrium of the insect ecosystem.



There is a lot more to consider for a successful flower or vegetable garden but a good plan, compost, the right plant for the area, adequate water, and a thick layer of mulch will get you on the right track. And, think twice before heading for that bug spray!

June 7, 2012