

The Truth Be Told

By Julie Silva

Gardening takes skill, patience, and knowledge. It may be a bumpy road to having success but Mother Nature is a swift and honest teacher. All gardeners have an opportunity to learn and grow from their mistakes, even Master Gardeners. Here are some stories from Master Gardeners demonstrating their missteps and the results. It is said that the best teachers are the ones that have walked the path early on.

Citrus Trees - I lived in an older house in Sacramento. One exterior wall faced west and the sun just cooked that section of the house. The answer was to plant citrus trees. The citrus was tough enough to take the heat. Unfortunately, as the citrus grew it blocked the old crank/ swing out windows. The solution would have been to aggressively prune them back to dwarf size but I moved.

Right Plant, Right Place - My goal has been to have a garden with flowers every season. Due to our intense summers, I planted cistus (rock rose) and santolina in partial shade to protect them. In doing so, I have never seen a flower on either one of them! Right plant, right place means finding a sunny spot and providing adequate water. Moving them is one of my jobs for fall.

Reclaiming the Sun - I had a small (10 x10) patio at the back of my house that I enlarged to 400 sq. ft. I put off gardening for many years since the patio was in the best sunny spot in the yard. I have recently reclaimed the sunny spot by using raised beds. Raised beds sit right on top of the patio, create a beautiful view, and use valuable growing space to create a producing garden.

A Thorny Situation - I didn't do this myself, I moved into it. When you plant thorny roses near fruit trees, take into consideration the size the plants will be in the future. I have one apple and one peach, both circled by roses. The roses are five feet from the trunk of the tree and three feet apart. Now they are full grown with the roses growing up into the canopy of the tree. My new motto is to step back, imagine your area fully matured, and be patient with the process.

What is that Smell? - My biggest mistake: never break a bottle of fish emulsion just before a dinner party. Second, don't forget to add brown matter into your compost pile. Both mistakes are equally smelly!

Make it Stop! - One year I planted horse radish. Just in my garden without any form of restraint. Horse radish spreads with vigor and determination. It took me two years to get it under control.

Read the Fine Print - When I started gardening, I just went for the pretty plants. I never read the labels, so most of the plants died either because I planted shade plants in full sun, or sun plants in the shade. Finally, after so much wasted money, I started reading the labels and planned my garden according to water and light needs of the plant.

Grab the Vacuum - When we built our house we created several dry creek beds but we made the mistake of planting deciduous bushes next to it. The creek bed would fill up with leaves and had to be almost vacuumed out.

Rodent Wars - I wanted a front lawn. Starting with bare ground I did all the right stuff; soil amendments, sprinkler system, leveling, tilling, and on and on. Everything was prepped so I brought in sod from Modesto. It was beautiful. Year one the voles moved in, like an explosion. They killed every blade of grass and the roots. Year two I replanted, this time seeding the grass. Gophers moved in. Not to lose to the rodents, I replanted grass over landscape hardware cloth. They found the weak areas around the sprinkler heads, destroying the lawn again. I took all the grass out, designed a low water use landscape. The area looked great and my water usage dropped significantly.

There is no doubt that gardening is an adventure. We all learn from our mistakes. It is safe to say that Mother Nature makes the rules. Whether you are planting roses or fruit trees the Master Gardeners are here to help and easy to find. Stop by the Farmory in Columbia on Wednesdays and Saturdays, Orchard Supply Hardware on Thursdays, and the Farmers Market on Saturdays. Come by and we can share stories. The Master Gardener hotline is: 209-533-5912.

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