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## ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS New to gardening? Avoid these common mistakes



Pat Sobrero picks tomatoes in her backyard garden in Covelo.

Photo: Beth Schlanker/Press Democrat 2013

**Question:** I'm new to gardening and am not having much success. Do you have any basic advice for beginners?

**Answer:** Yes, we do. There are several mistakes new, and even experienced, gardeners make that are helpful to keep in mind.

**Wrong plant or place:** A common mistake is buying a plant unsuitable for your environment or putting an appropriate plant in the wrong place. To avoid this, familiarize yourself with your growing zone, soil type, sun and shade patterns, irrigation system and drainage. Before buying a plant, know its growing zone, maximum size, need for sun and/or shade, irrigation, wind protection, soil pH and structural support to ensure your environment will be suitable for it. Nurseries often carry soil testing kits. Here's a link for determining soil type: [bit.ly/3IA7iX5](https://bit.ly/3IA7iX5)

**Improper Planting:** Many plants fail due to mistakes in planting. Important considerations are the correct time of year to plant, loosening matted roots, creating a large enough hole, planting at the right depth and providing structural support where needed. Here is additional information on planting:

*Planting vegetables: [bit.ly/43lgb0i](http://bit.ly/43lgb0i)*

*Planting a tree: [bit.ly/3PkeNVI](http://bit.ly/3PkeNVI)*

**Irrigation Mistakes:** Overwatering is the most common way to kill plants. Check your soil moisture regularly and compare it to the needs of the plant. Most garden centers carry inexpensive moisture meters. These meters have a long soil probe with a scale ranging from very dry to very wet. Drip irrigation is recommended, but it's important to have plants with the same moisture needs in their own watering zone. For existing systems, an irrigation specialist can help you identify and modify your zones to ensure each plant receives the proper amount of water. In general, watering deeply to reach the roots of the plant is preferable to frequent shallow watering. Here is information on drip irrigation: [bit.ly/3vhLhZS](http://bit.ly/3vhLhZS)

**Mulch mistakes:** The biggest mistake gardeners make with mulch is not to use it. Mulch is highly beneficial: it suppresses weeds, retains soil moisture, moderates soil temperature, controls erosion and feeds the soil, thus reducing the need for fertilizers. Mulch comes in many varieties, such as wood chips, bark, straw, leaves and grass clippings. Gravel and rocks are also considered mulch; they won't breakdown like organic mulches but, being noncombustible, are safer to use near structures. Newspapers or cardboard can be placed under bark or wood chips to provide additional weed suppression. Mulch is most effective when applied deeply, usually 2-4" minimum depending on the type, and needs to be replenished as it breaks down. Be careful to pull it several inches away from tree trunks and woody stems to avoid root rot and damage to trunks. Here is more information on mulch: [bit.ly/3TDbmw5](http://bit.ly/3TDbmw5)

**Over-fertilizing:** A good rule of thumb is to "feed the soil, not the plant," but many people don't know what this entails and overuse chemical fertilizers. Over-fertilizing can result in unwanted spurts of growth, root damage, reduction of fruit production and attraction of pests.

Mulching and semiannual applications of compost feed the soil sufficiently for the health of many plants. Compost, which is decomposed organic matter, is a good source of nutrients and will improve the texture of the soil. You don't need to dig it in, just layer it on top of the soil or mulch. Most landscape trees do not need fertilizer, nor do native plants, unless they're in pots. Food crops and flowering plants often benefit from fertilizing, but first check the condition of your soil and your plant's needs to ensure fertilizer is necessary, then select the right type for each plant and carefully follow instructions on the container. Here is additional information:

*Enriching Soil: [bit.ly/3veEkJ9](http://bit.ly/3veEkJ9)*

*Vegetable Garden: [bit.ly/3ViaAI](http://bit.ly/3ViaAI)*

**Overusing pesticides:** Not all insects are bad. Learn to distinguish which are beneficial and how to attract them. Also, learn to tolerate the presence of some insects; only take action if they become a true problem. When managing unwanted insects and other pests, follow the guidelines of Integrated Pest Management to minimize risks to people and the environment: [bit.ly/490guOZ](http://bit.ly/490guOZ)

**Pruning mistakes:** Many plants will tolerate a certain amount of over or under pruning. However, there are certain things you need to know for success, such as where and how to cut a branch, the correct tools to use, and the proper time of year to prune each plant. Tree topping should be avoided; it stresses the trees, makes them more prone to disease and decay, and leads to higher risk of injury due to poor branch attachment. When in doubt, consult a certified arborist. Here is additional information on pruning:

*Pruning Fruit Trees:* [bit.ly/3H4ABQT](http://bit.ly/3H4ABQT)

*Pruning Woody Plants:* [bit.ly/3v1ap7n](http://bit.ly/3v1ap7n)

**Not reading labels:** Don't assume you already have all the facts. Carefully read all instructions and warnings for fertilizers and pesticides. Please note, organic does not guarantee nontoxic.

**Not consulting reliable resources:** The internet abounds with home garden remedies, but only use advice based on reliable research. For information and advice from Sonoma County Master Gardeners, see the link at the end of this article. When conducting internet searches add 'site: edu' to your search bar; the first results will be from universities and cooperative extension programs.

*Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu>, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmgpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmgpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or [mgsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:mgsonoma@ucanr.edu)*