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A Valentine Gift to a Gardener

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

My husband gave me the best Valentine's Day present a gardener could ask for. He complained about the shabby appearance of the flower bed adjacent to the south side of our home. Of course that meant I would have to make a trip to the nursery for steer manure, new perennials, two or three focal plants and a few six packs of annual color.

This bed is 4 feet wide by 30 feet long and gets strong light all day, but no direct sun. Shade loving plants should do well. The soil is extremely porous and powdery. I will incorporate several bags of steer manure into the planting area which will be mainly 12-18 inches wide in the center of the bed. I won't plant too close to the edge in order to give the plants room to grow without encroaching on the sidewalk.

The first thing I did was rake the existing, good wood chips to the edge of each side of the bed. There was nothing wrong with the wood chips and they are expensive to replace. When I'm finished with the new planting I will rake the bark back around the new plants. The thick layer of bark keeps the soil from baking in the summer, retains moisture and prevents most weeds from germinating.

Old Plants: I tossed three gardenias onto the compost pile. They were very yellow because the soil is alkaline and I have never added the nutrients necessary to provide the acid environment they require. A few aged perennials also wound up on the compost pile.

I also dug up and divided several amaryllis bulbs that never bloomed because they didn't get direct sunlight. I have them in lots of places in the yard already, so I'm taking them to a plant swap later this month at the COS Farm.

Replacement Plants: I found a beautiful Daphne plant (Daphne odora) in bloom at a local nursery. This plant is revered more for its fragrance and foliage than for its light rose colored flowers. I placed it beneath the dining room window and near the front door. It should grow to 3 feet tall and 6 feet wide, which is just perfect for under my window. The winter fragrance near the front door will be added value.

I also planted three New Zealand Flax plants. These plants might need more sun to achieve a good dark red color, but I'm hoping the bright light will be enough. They may outgrow this bed in three or four years, but since I am such an avid gardener, I don't mind dividing and moving them. They add a striking structure that draws attention and is very different from the other plants in this bed.

I added five Bowles Mauve Wallflowers (Erysimum 'Bowles Mauve'), an upright perennial which blooms virtually year round and has narrow lance-shaped, gray-green leaves. There are no insect pests or diseases that bring it down and it requires virtually "no" care. Just make sure to plant them with enough space and lightly prune them as they are growing to a desired shape. They are considered a short-lived perennial which means 3-5 years, but since a gallon size plant costs about $4.00 each, they are a bargain.

For sparkle and attention I added several six packs of English Daisies throughout the bed. Their white and pink daisy flowers draw attention to the bed and should continue blooming through the early summer. All these plants are drought tolerant with the exception of the English Daisies, which need more than average water. Losing a couple of six packs of annuals will be worth the experiment, because I need the early splash of color that these daisies offer to make this bed appealing now.

As usual I got a little carried away and am experimenting with some of my plants. I tend to push the envelope on the rules and this flowerbed is no exception. But as J.C. Raulston said, "If you aren't killing plants, then you aren't really stretching yourself as a Gardener."

Creating your flowerbed: You shouldn't copy me, but instead go to the nursery and place plants on your cart that you think will work in your flowerbed. Check the tags to be sure they have the same water, soil, sunlight, and shade requirements, and that you realize their ultimate size. Before you purchase them, talk your ideas over with the nursery assistant.

To learn more about gardening: The Master Gardeners are hosting the 2009 Flowers, Trees, and Gardens GALORE: A "Landscape Seminar" EXTRAVAGANZA at the Visalia Convention Center on February 28. Don't miss this rare opportunity to hear 18 garden experts talk about home gardening and landscaping in the Central Valley. Author and Keynote speaker Amy Stewart will be on hand to sign her gardening books. Pre-register on line at http://cetulare.ucdavis.edu and click on Master Gardeners, or call 685-3303 for more information.

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