

December 30, 2015

Painful Gardening Mistakes: Master Gardeners Tell All

By Paula Bertram

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

We were recently able to wheedle/cajole/bribe some of our most experienced Master Gardeners into admitting their mistakes. Really bonehead mistakes. Rookie errors. Under the conditions of anonymity, these MGs recount some of their gardening bloopers.

1. Right place/wrong plant errors.

“We built our house next to three young Douglas Firs. From eight feet, they have grown to 40-foot giants, tower over the house, shade everything, and are a major fire concern. Now cutting those down will be very tricky without risk to house.”

“I planted a rock rose near the asparagus bed. In a few years it grew over most of the bed, attracted by the water and fertilizer used. I pruned it back on one side, only to create the most unattractive, bare branch rockrose in history. It never grew back any leaves on the pruned side. Finally decided to dig it out---destroying the rest of the asparagus bed in a “Caddy Shack” scenario.

Remember, friends, plants grow. They can be like kittens or puppies. Very cute and easy to pick up and move around in the early stages... but then they get big, heavy, and they shed. Somebody has to water and feed during your vacations. And they live a long time. Scrutinize the plant label or a good gardening reference before purchasing or planting something permanent. Decide whether the ultimate size and horticultural needs of the plant work with your space, hardscape and plant neighbors.

2. Potted Plant Woes.

“I have the bad habit of buying beautiful plants at nurseries or plant sales. I want to have one of everything! Then they sit on my porch for months because I don’t have time or space to plant them. Then they die and I start accumulating more unfortunate victims.”

“I received a beautiful Japanese Maple in a gorgeous pot as a gift. After a while, it looked droopy. I decided to repot it in a smaller container (?). The roots were rotted from too much watering, so I watered it less. It continued to decline. When I decided to put it out of its misery, I discovered that **I had left the plastic nursery tag on the trunk**. The poor thing had strangled.”

‘Nuff said---just makes you want to weep, doesn’t it?

3. No Good Deed Goes Unpunished Department

“I planted a cover crop mix -- not only in my vegetable garden, but under oaks in a wilder area of the property. For some reason I thought the oaks “needed nitrogen.” Now I spend all my time mowing down invasive clover and vetch instead of the native grasses that were there.”

December 30, 2015

“I used to subscribe to the ‘if a little is good, a lot is better’ theory of gardening. By completely over fertilizing my lawn, I created a striking tiger-ish effect: death-by-fertilizer burned streaks alternated with lush green growth where I had missed.”

Decisions on fertilizer, cover crops and other cultural requirements are not always simple. Sometimes Less (really) is More. Get a good up-to-date gardening text and /or consult reliable sources such as University of California Cooperative Extension to get research-based advice.

4. The Power of Mistakes

“Somebody gave me a rooted cutting from their garden. I planted it in the back of the bed and promptly forgot both what it was called and where I put it.” (Boy, does this sound familiar!) “For two years we kept unwittingly either pulling parts of it up or trimming it to the ground. Finally, this spring, we never got around to weeding. The neglected sticks grew into five foot asters covered in blue flowers from July until frost.”

Although painful and sometimes costly, mistakes are important. Lessons learned from mistakes are much more powerful than what we learn from successes. Or so social scientists tell us. We mere mortals must bumble along, trying our best. And sometimes the “mistake” is really a disguised gift. So label your plants. And be at peace with your mistakes.

Happy New Year!

There is no Master Gardener public education class this Saturday. UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg>. Sign up to receive our online notices and eNewsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.