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New Garden, Old Garden  
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For many of us, our home is a place to relax - and often a place to *garden*. It does not matter if the gardening space is measured in acres or square feet. What does matter to gardeners is whether you are living in a new house with a new yard, or an old house with an existing gardenscape.

New homes come with a different set of garden problems than older houses. No matter where that new home is built, the process of preparing the site will likely be as follows. The contractor will first strip off the topsoil, dig the footings for the foundation, dig trenches for the utility, sewer, and electric lines - and then rebury all of the open areas to level the property. The topsoil is removed because the very thing which makes it good for growing makes it bad for foundations of homes. Topsoil is too unstable to make a solid base and will cause uneven settling, eventually damaging the foundation and walls of the house.

Soil compaction during construction is a major factor in damaging existing trees or shrubs. Large existing trees have root systems that can extend from five to seven times the circumference of the tree's trunk. A mature tree can have a root system that extends across the entire construction site on small properties! In these situations, the tree may be in peril despite looking fine to the new residents.

During construction, small amounts of other materials such as cement, asphalt, paint, wood scraps, and dry wall are often castoff into the soil. This will raise the PH level of the soil which can affect new plantings. This is important because the roots of most trees and shrubs extend only twenty-four to thirty-six inches below the surface. The roots of new plantings are especially shallow. Since most plants like soil that has neither a too high or too low PH, soil with the proper PH is vital to ensuring the survivability of the plant.

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Often a thin layer of topsoil, three to six inches in depth, is added back, and the front yard may have a lawn and some trees or shrubs installed. Plants placed in any area of the yard will have roots primarily sit in soil below the topsoil, thus exposing them to any soil conditions already present on site. The back or side yard is rarely improved past adding topsoil, so keep in mind that these parts of the yard will *require significant soil amendment* if you plan to plant vegetables, flowers, shrubs, or trees.

Older homes present a completely different set of issues. You might get a nice well-maintained garden, a not-so-good-looking garden, or nothing that even remotely resembles a garden! Old gardens can have problems related to poor garden practices, poor plant selection, or plants that threaten the foundation or structure of the home. This can include plants that are unsuited to the area, trees planted too close to the house or driveway, over-use of pesticides, out-of-control weeds, etc.

With older homes, if it's possible, ask the previous residents about the yard. You may learn of drainage problems, maintenance schedules, even when was the last tree-trimming. If they did garden, how did they control weeds or plant diseases? If the property is irrigated, you might turn on the system to check for which zones water where and also spot leaks.

Older gardens often have mature plantings. Maybe there will be an opportunity to exercise your pruning skills? Perhaps a cleared overgrown patch will reveal a dormant perennial border? Whether you fine-tune an existing garden, or start over from scratch, remember the soil! New garden or old, we want to improve soil conditions by adding organic matter. Soil amendments such as garden soil, manures, compost, and mulch, are all great ways to improve the fertility of our soil.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news). You can also find us on Facebook.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind the Folsom Lake College - El Dorado Center. We're open 9:00 a.m. to noon, Fridays and Saturdays.