

Soil quality a big factor in gardening

The best gift to give all landscape and garden plants is good soil.

“A wise gardener used to tell me, ‘Grow the roots, and the top will take care of itself.’ I’ve found there’s a lot of truth in that,” said Amy Jordan, horticulturist with Kansas State University Research and Extension.

Other factors can also have a big impact on plant success, Jordan noted, including wind, hail, pests, flooding, drought, growing days, temperatures and sunlight hours and intensity.

“Plants vary widely in sensitivity to environmental factors,” she said. “That’s why gardeners are more likely to do well when they use native or native-like plants. It’s also why regional landscapes tend to develop their own ‘look.’ A typical Arizona landscape won’t look like a typical yard for California, Kansas, Michigan or Georgia.”

If plants are sited in the right location, however, the factors that determine whether they thrive typically come down to soil, Jordan said. This includes the soil’s acidity, nutrients, texture and water-handling ability.

“Soil isn’t static,” she said. “Plants and runoff can remove nutrients. Moisture content can range widely. The fertilizers and mulches we use have an impact. That’s why soil testing every three to five years is so important.”

Test are the only way to know if the soil for certain plants needs a pH adjustment, she said. Azaleas, for example, often need more acidity than found in most Kansas soils.

Results also reveal where soil has nutritional deficiencies – or excesses. For instance, lawn soils nearly always need a yearly nitrogen meal, but may already have more than



Given good water and weather, the success or failure of a garden often comes down to soil quality. Acidity, amount of nutrients, texture and water handling ability can vary depending on the kind of soil. Some soils need help, such as nitrogen fertilizer, to get optimum growing results.

enough phosphorus and potassium.

“To loosen clay soils and improve most soils’ water-handling abilities, the best idea is to regularly incorporate organic materials: peat moss, compost, aged manure or rotted hay,” Jordan said. “Of course, doing that is

difficult with lawns and established plantings. But, mowing often enough that you can just let the clippings drop will help – without contributing to thatch. Using organic mulches that decay over time – wood chips or compost, for example – will improve the soil around orna-

mentals and perennials.”

Help with soil testing and more about soil improvements is available from the county Extension office, she said.

Eco-friendly yards, tropical plants to be the big trends in 2010

Jennifer Smith starts each new year raking around and digging up what’s likely to be “hot” in landscapes and gardens during the months ahead.

“We’ve always got a few new plant releases and a few new tools for every growing season. One or two items may gain popularity through an infomercial. This year’s trends, however, are also indicating some real culture shifts,” said Smith, horticulturist with Kansas State University Research and Extension.

Her predictions for what will be “in” in 2010 include:

1. More fruits and veggies – even if that requires adding some edibles to existing landscape beds, planting them instead of annual flowers, or plowing up and gardening part of the lawn. Fresh-picked taste, money saved, self-satisfaction and food safety will all drive this on-going change.

Spurring it along will be last year’s upside-down tomato planter, as well as Topsy Turvy containers for strawberries, hot peppers, and

a combination of tomatoes and herbs. To help gardeners grow lettuce and basil year-round in their home, the market will be offering tiny indoor gardens with their own grow light.

2. More green – a rapidly building trend toward more eco-friendly yards, which this year will bring more containers made from recycled materials, more electric-powered equipment, and more native or near-native plants that need few to no chemicals to thrive.

3. More gadgets – tools for today’s technology junkies, ranging from robotic lawn mowers to gardening applications for smartphones.

4. Tropical foliage plants in the landscape – which in Kansas may mean moving houseplants outdoors for summer, using tropicals as annual plants, and/or planting more tender bulbs (e.g., giant elephant ears, caladiums, calla lilies).

5. Moving-water sounds without pond maintenance – bubbling fountains and/or pondless waterfalls. The fountains will also

provide water to attract pest-controlling songbirds.

6. Smarter irrigation controls – whether person- or technology-driven. For the latter,

weather stations that work with irrigation systems are becoming both smaller and more affordable.

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