

5 Mistakes Gardeners Make

By: Dottie Baltz

I've been known to make a mistake or two in my gardens. I think we all have at one time or another. I also feel like I learned more from my mistakes than from reading many gardening books. That being said, I'd like to tell you about some of the more costly mistakes that are made and how you can avoid them.

Mistake #1 – Planting too close to a building, well or septic system

This is a huge mistake and I see it being done almost on a daily basis. It amazes me that even professional landscapers make this mistake often. Trees and shrubs should not be planted next to the house, period, yet it is done all the time.

The main reason is that the roots can eventually damage the foundation. In the case of large trees, tree limbs can fall and cause damage to your house. Leaves can block drainage and cause damage. Vines growing up the side of a house can cause damage to siding or soffits. Plants can block windows when they get too big, causing safety or security issues or blocking light from reaching indoors. Plants are in the way when maintenance on the house needs to be done.

Same is true for planting too close to wells and septic systems. The roots can invade these areas and cause costly damages. Generally you should not plant closer than 25-30 feet to a well or within 50 feet of a septic system, and don't choose trees or shrubs that love water, like willows. Choose dwarf or smaller varieties when possible. Look at the plant tags and see how wide they are supposed to grow and then add a few feet to that number. Cut that number in half and that's how far away from a house, well, or septic you should plant it.

For example: The plant tag says a Golden Shadow Dogwood has a mature spread of 6'-10'. If I add 3' to the maximum spread, I get 13'. Divide that by 2 and my answer is 6.5'. So I will make sure when I plant this it will be at least 6.5 feet away from a well, septic or the foundation of the house.

Mistake #2 – Not planning ahead for the mature size of a plant

This kind of thing goes hand in hand with number 1. In fact, I make this mistake on purpose from time to time, but it's really important to know the mature size of a plant before planting it so that you don't plant things too close together.

In the case of trees and shrubs, you don't want to have to keep pruning it to keep it the size you want. Instead, plant the right sized shrub in the right spot and avoid all that extra pruning. I'm a lazy gardener. I don't need any extra work.

If you are filling in a large area with perennials, you may want to plant a little closer together for a larger impact now. Just remember that in 2-3 years, you will need to divide and move many of those plants because they will be crowding each other out. I planted too close together many times in the beginning because I needed to fill a large space. My only regret is that I also planted close to a tree that is growing faster than expected and it will be very difficult to move these perennials without damaging the roots of the tree. Learn from my mistake, don't do it.

Mistake #3 – Over fertilizing

This mistake is made all the time. They see a plant that isn't doing well and assume it needs fertilizer when in fact something else could be wrong, like soil pH or the wrong amount of water. Too much fertilizer can stunt plants, make them weaker and more prone to pest damage because they always have nice tender foliage for them to munch on. Synthetic fertilizers are even more damaging when not used properly.

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To take the guess work out of fertilizing, stop using synthetic fertilizers and apply compost to your garden beds at least once a year. Twice a year in warmer climates with longer growing seasons (Spring and Fall). If you have roses or other heavy feeders that need more nutrients, switch to organic fertilizers such as fish emulsion, compost tea or alfalfa tea. Espoma makes a great line of granular products too. If you insist on using synthetic fertilizers, use them at half strength and applied once a week, maximum.

If you are still having problems, have a soil test done at your local county extension office or laboratory. Don't know where one is in your area? Check with a good plant nursery (not a big box store) in your neighborhood for a recommendation. At home kits are ok for checking soil pH, but there are more tests the lab will do to determine what is actually in your soil and what may need to be added to make your soil better for the type of plants you are growing.

Mistake #4 – Over watering

Again, this is a very common mistake, especially with houseplants. In general, most plants need 1" of water a week to grow well. If they are slow growers, they most likely will need less water.

Always know how much water your plant requires for optimum growth. Though plants are forgiving, a cactus is not going to like having constant water all the time, but a rose bush may benefit from two or three deep soakings a week.

Before watering anything, stick your finger in the soil. If it feels dry three or four inches down, water deeply until that area is completely saturated. You shouldn't need another watering until the next week or you can let Mother Nature take care of it. Plants tend to perform better and be able to resist drought better when they are given longer waterings less often than shallow frequent waterings.

Mistake #5 – Growing plants that are invasive

This mistake is made by many new gardeners as well as experienced ones. Sometimes we love a plant so much we don't take into account that it could be choking out a native species.

What is an invasive plant, you ask? By definition it's any plant that thrives outside it's natural habitat, is adaptable to any growing condition and reproduces rapidly. Invasive plants are choking out native plants that our native critters need for food or shelter. This causes a chain reaction that can be detrimental to our environment.

Some plants can be more invasive in some areas than others, but it's always a good rule of thumb to not grow any of them in your yard or gardens, even if they don't appear to be a problem right off the bat. We have an old Norway Maple in our yard that I would love to cut down, but it's a mature shade tree that we need and it would cost a lot to have it removed. As soon as it is feasible to do so, however, it will be cut down.

For more information on invasive species, I encourage you to check out the National Invasive Species Information Center at <http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov>.

Those are my top five mistakes that gardeners make. There are loads more, but heh, isn't that part of the fun of gardening? To try new things and learn from your own mistakes?

Happy Gardening!