

A close-up photograph of a black watering can's spout pouring water onto a lush green garden. The water is captured mid-pour, creating a spray of droplets that glistens against the dark background of the foliage. The plants below are vibrant green and appear to be young seedlings or small plants.

So You Want a Better Garden?

The Ultimate Australian Guide to Becoming a Better Gardener and Having a Better Garden

by Aussie Green Thumb

Disclaimer

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As much as I believe in the advice that you will read about here, and I do, I cannot offer any guarantees, legal or otherwise. This is just advice from one gardener to another and should not constitute official, legal guidance. I choose to include this disclaimer at the front of my book, rather than hiding it because I do not believe you'll need to worry. I wrote this book because I believe very strongly in what I think you will learn from this book!

No one can actually guarantee anything when it comes to gardening because gardening can be fickle. I want to admit this up-front rather than pretending that this is not true. Sometimes plants will die even if you follow these tips exactly. I need you to be aware that in taking my advice, I accept no responsibility if something does go wrong. However, you may contact me through my website and I am more than willing to try and help you rectify whatever has happened. I want to equip you as a gardener.

If I do not know the answer, I generally have contacts to people who will. This e- book is no legal guarantee to make your garden better. It is, however, a collection of advice learned and written over the 26 years I have been alive and gardening on God's green earth. Good luck!

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Introduction

So you want a better garden? Congratulations on taking this step toward that goal!

Whether you truly are a beginner in every sense of the word or you have been walking the garden path for a while but feel the need for some extra help, I hope that you find some advice that you can apply *today* from this book. It is my belief that everyone can have a garden they are happy with.



My aims are to help you start to have the garden you want *today* and equip you to make sure you still have it *tomorrow*. The aim of this book is to help you take the next step towards achieving your gardening goals.

Firstly however, a few things you need to know. This book is unashamably simple. Don't get me wrong, some of the content may stretch you and leave you saying 'this is simple?' but, in time you will see that it is. I wanted to tackle some of the basics here to help ground you in the world of gardening.

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Secondly, this book is also not entirely comprehensive. I have not covered everything that could be considered 'basic'. What I have chosen to do is cover the topics which I know best and which I have been learning about since I started gardening. For example, I don't cover a lot regarding growing from seeds because for most of my gardening journey I have always used seedlings. Are seedlings better than seeds? Yes and no, but that *is* one of the topics that I cover, so read on!

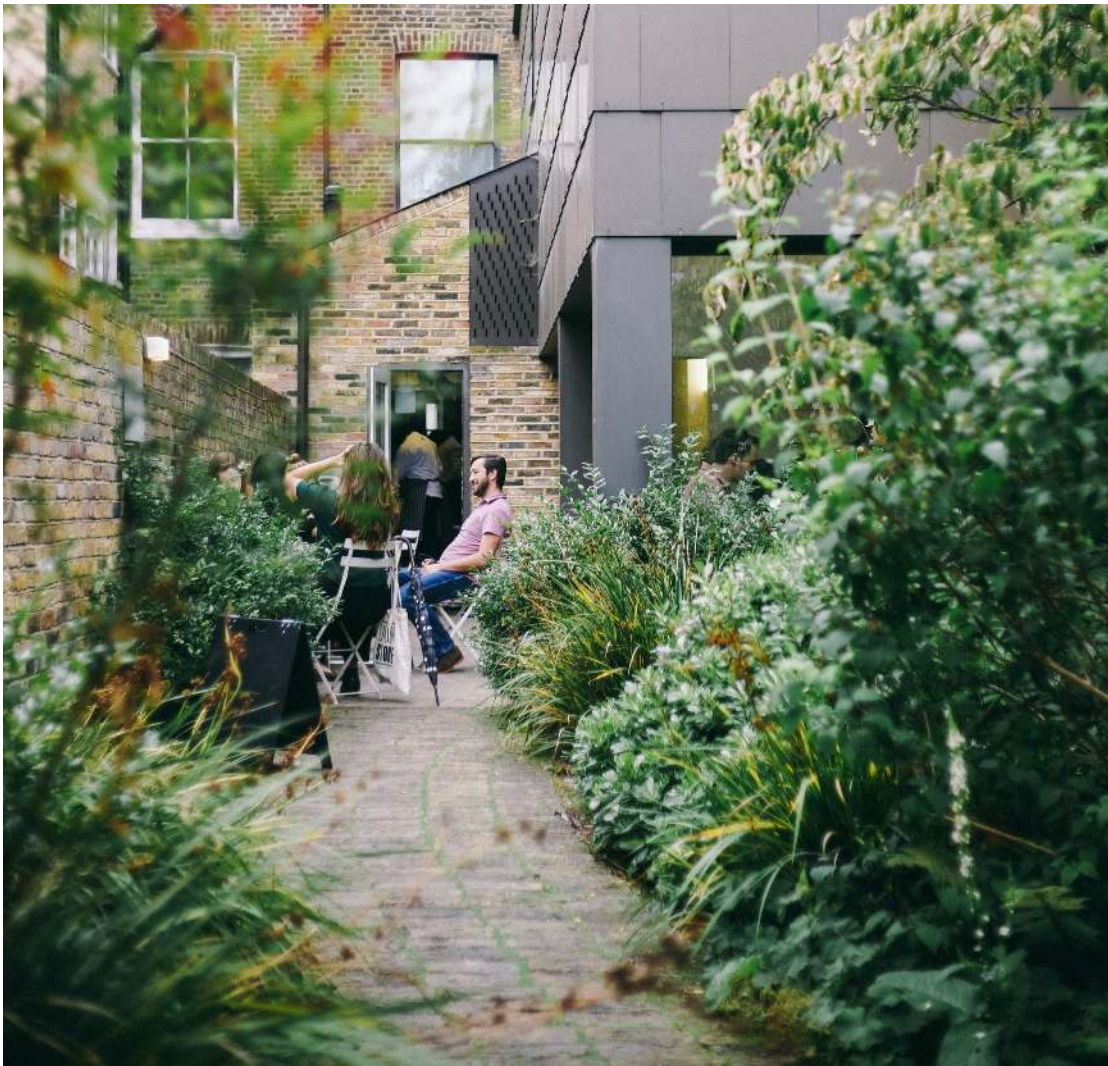
As I discussed in my previous e-book 'One Secret gardeners Don't Want You To Know', being a good gardener is all about having the right mindset. If you want to be a gardener, start to think of yourself as one from today! The key difference between good and bad gardeners I believe is the mindset they approach their garden with. gardeners see mistakes and the death of plants as an opportunity to grow and learn. Brown thumbs see it as a blight on themselves.

Whether you have been gardening for 10 minutes or 10 years, don't count yourself out before you even begin by thinking of yourself as a bad gardener. Instead, you are a gardener in training.

And with that, let's get on with it!

Chapter 1

Understanding Garden Design



Part 1 - Garden Bed Shape & Size

From the outset I want to make it very clear that no question, when it comes to gardening, is a dumb question. One of the most common questions I get asked is:

Does the shape and size of my garden beds matter?

Well, the answer to this question is mostly no, with the occasional yes.



It is mostly no in that you can make any garden shape and size work. No garden bed is too big or too small for a garden; it is a concern only when you have extremely specific plans for what you want that you need to consider garden shape and size. What you need to ask yourself is: which of two camps do you fall into?

- Do you have a blank slate to work with? OR
- Do you have an already defined space to work with?

How you answer this question will determine how important garden bed shape and size is to your garden design.

Working from a blank slate

If you are working from a blank slate and you have no specific 'this must be this way' situations, then you have total control over your entire garden area. What you do in terms of garden bed shape and size is not hugely important. Working from a blank slate is great because you really do have the power to customise everything just the way you like it.

If you want square garden beds, you can have square garden beds. If you prefer round ones, then make round ones.

If you like to be creative and have lots of edges and corners then go for it!

One tip to go along with the freedom of a blank slate.

The only tip I would give you, when working from a blank slate, is to think through more than just how your garden will look but how it will function. A lot of really small garden beds might look quite quaint, but if you want some larger plants then this is probably not beneficial. A many edged garden bed might look fantastic, but if you have lawn next to it which has to be mowed, moving in and out of the edges may become tedious or even require you to buy something like a brush cutter.

You may also want to think about your house's resale value. Amazing gardens can add a lot of value to your house but can equally effect value if it is clear that your gardens take a lot to maintain; this could diminish the number of people who will seriously consider buying it. Big, beautiful, but simple garden designs often provide the best value for your house's resale value.

Working within a defined space

If you are going to be working from a defined space, this limits what you can actually do. Whether this is because you are;

- a) renting;
- b) living in an apartment;
- c) already have garden beds and don't want to make new ones, or;
- d) for any other reason

Then you will need to consider your defined space when deciding what to plant.

For example, you might have an area that is 1m by 1m and think 'planting a tree there would be nice.' Though a tree may in fact fit, this is probably a bad idea *mostly* because what will cause the most problems is not what is above, but what is below: the root system. This is not to say that you are *limited* when you have a defined space, it just requires you to be more creative.

I was in Germany a couple of year ago and was walking past an apartment block when something caught my eye. Hanging from every side of the balcony of a second story unit were big, rectangular pots. Growing from these pots were huge shrubs which just about formed a hedge around the balcony. Better yet, they didn't take up ANY of the balcony space. Now, I would assume most people would need to get permission from their landlords to do this, if renting, because it involves drilling into the walls and the like, but I was struck by how well this resident had used a small space. The pots themselves were not huge, just big enough to house one shrub each.

If you have either just bought a house which already has defined beds *or* you don't feel the need to change the ones you have, your choice of plants is more important. As I've said above, any size bed can work, you just need to check the growth habit of your plants of choice before planting them and make sure you give them enough room to grow.

If you have a plant with a growth habit of 1m high by 1m wide that would be fine in a 1m x 1m bed, but if you wanted to plant two in that space you would have issues. This seems like a simple concept, but I have caught many a gardener making this mistake because they planted them small, not realising just how big some shrubs can grow.

Part 2 - Garden Bed Location

Location of garden beds is one area where I have found vast differences of opinion from one gardener to the next. Some gardeners are absolutely adamant that there is *one way* to orient garden beds for optimal growth while others, like me, believe any location can work if you understand what is going on in each bed position.

The two main things you need to consider when thinking about where to locate your garden beds or what to plant in a particular garden bed are:

- How much sun is there? and;
- How much wind is there?

Sun positioning

Making sure that you understand how the sun will interact with your various garden beds is very important in developing your gardening skills. Knowing whether a garden bed will receive full sun or perhaps partial shade or even full shade will go a long way towards making sure you plant something that will grow in that location.

When considering how the sun will affect your garden, one of the best tips I have learnt is to grab a piece of paper and roughly map out your property. Include your house, fences, tall trees, or any other tall objects. Now, on the piece of paper, note where the sun rises from and where it sets in relation to your property. The sun will rise in the east and set in the west. This will affect the amount of sun your garden gets and when.

Plants can survive in some conditions and they have other conditions that they will thrive in. The sun they require is a very important element of this. Most vegetables, for example, need six hours of direct sunlight per day to do well. Many ferns on the other hand, generally being quite tropical in nature, require shade; full sun causing them to wilt rather quickly. Some plants can handle part sun/part shade.

When considering the sun positioning, the morning sun is less brutal than the afternoon sun, so in garden beds which receive lots of afternoon sun you will want to plant shrubs which thrive in a lot of sun. Beds located to receive good morning sun might be a good position for plants which require sun, but which prefer a little shade.

How your house sits and the location of any walls, tall trees, or other big structures will also affect how your plants grow. Trees will block sun on their west side in the morning and their east side in the afternoon. The same applies to your house. If your front door is facing west, make sure any garden beds outside your front door are filled with strong sun plants because they will take in the afternoon sun.

The best advice I can give regarding the sun is to look at your own garden at different times during the day and physically see when each garden bed gets sun and how much. Do this in the summer, autumn, winter, and spring because as the seasons change, so does the amount of sun. What gets little sun in winter could conceivably get a lot more in summer because the sun is higher in the sky. What seems like a great sun position in summer may prove to be less than perfect if the sun passes much lower during winter. Growing a better garden is a long term project.

How does the wind affect my garden?

The wind can wreak havoc on your garden if you do not carefully consider its affect. Some parts of Australia experience strong winds on a regular basis (like the Western Australian coast) where as others will experience far less wind (generally central Australia). Then, in some areas, one side of your house will be buffeted by wind, while another side remains sheltered all day. Many plants are quite okay in any wind condition, but when you choose your plants, check and see if wind could be a problem. This will often be noted on the back of the plant's description.

Even if a plant is susceptible to strong winds, you can often get around this. It just means if you receive strong winds, particularly in the afternoon, you may need to stake down any plants which are on the side of your house that is most affected.

This just means getting a long, thin piece of wood (or any similar object), sticking it into the ground and tying the plants to the stake, providing a little extra support. Tomatoes are an example of a plant which requires stakes, particularly when growing in areas of strong wind, otherwise the stem could fall over and even snap, often killing the plant.

Delicate plants, like Impatiens, prefer to be located in a sheltered position rather than in an area that receives strong winds. This is mostly because their stems are often rather weak. They can handle the weight of their own leaves and flowers but not necessarily the force of regular strong winds blowing on them.

Part 3 - Five Great Ways to Decoratively Show Off Your Plants

There are many varied and different ways that you can take a simple garden space and really make it shine. Different techniques that span from the use of other items to the way you lay out your plants will help make your garden space that little bit more special. Here are five different ideas that you might like to consider trying in your garden.

1. Using an old wheelbarrow

Many people have old wheelbarrows that no longer work in the way they were designed to or they have upgraded to a newer model. Rather than just throwing away the wheelbarrow or leaving it to sit around and rust away, why not use it as a pot of sorts?

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In order to do this, you must choose where you want to feature your wheelbarrow plant, place it there, and then fill the wheelbarrow with a good soil mix.

I'd recommend against using a cheap potting mix because the soil could be quite shallow. Mix a good potting mix with some of your existing soil and add some manures and fertiliser to the mix to create a good soil combination. Then, make your choice of plants.



2. Turn an old bathtub into a garden bed

This is a similar idea to using a wheelbarrow but it allows a greater variety of plant choices. If you are lucky enough to have an old bath lying around *or* you are considering a bathroom renovation which would leave you with a spare bath, why not use it in your garden?

Objects like wheelbarrows and bathtubs add something *different* to what most people generally expect to see in a garden. The big upside to using a bathtub is that you can plant bigger growing shrubs and also plant 3-4 different plants in the same tub.

As with the wheelbarrow, choose where you want to feature your bathtub, place it there and then fill it almost to the top with a good soil mix, described above. Make your plant selections and then plant them. I, myself, like to plant larger growing plants in the middle and then plant smaller growing shrubs on the outside, however there are a variety of planting methods, including the following tip.

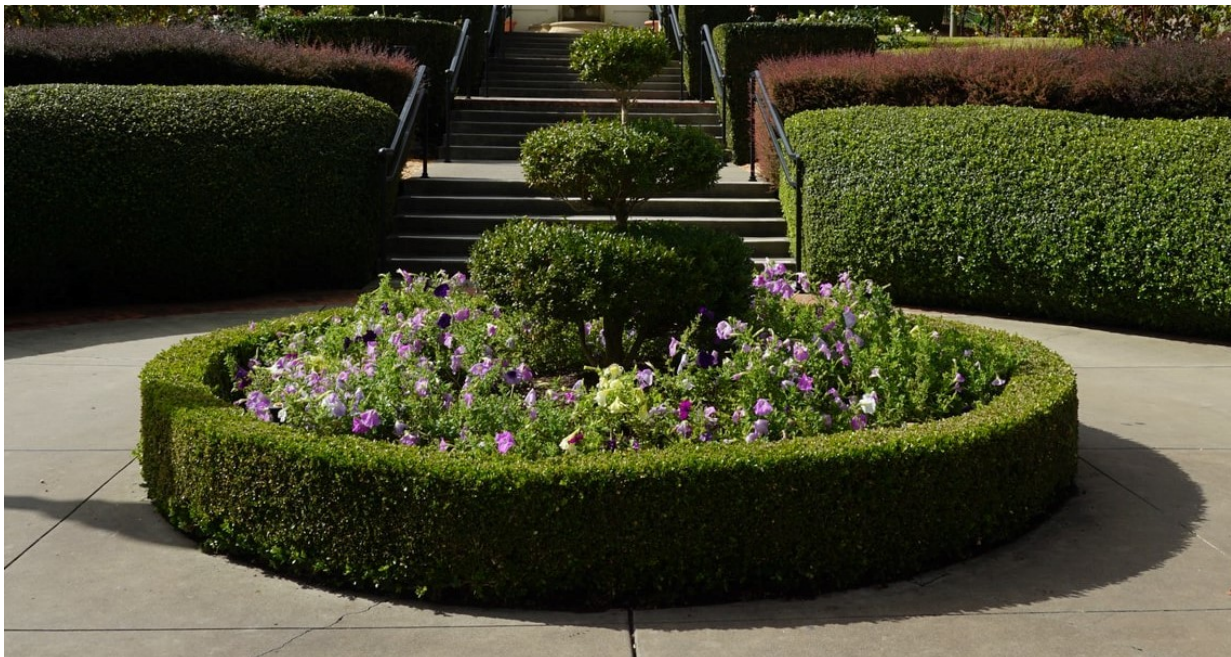


3. Tall and short planting

I mentioned a *style* of planting in the last section which basically suggested you plant taller growing shrubs in the middle and then progressively plant shorter ones on the outside. This is by far the most common way of planting, but it is not the only way.

One great way to spice up your garden is to actually mix and match the growth habits. Plant a groundcover in the middle and then surround it with a mix of tall and short growing plants. Create an interesting hedge design by planting a tall shrub and then a small shrub and then a tall shrub and then a small shrub.

Plant a smaller growing shrub in the middle of a garden space and then plant some taller but thin growing plants around the outside. What this will do is still allow you to see the plant growing in the middle but at the same time create the allusion of depth or even what I call the 'jungle' look. There is something about looking through a plant to see a central plant that makes me think 'jungle,' however, this is not an industry standard term.



4. Rocks, rocks, rocks

This is an idea that I think is far too often overlooked by people who are new to doing more than just digging a hole and throwing a plant in it. Growing a garden is so much more than just growing plants; it is about creating a space which, in some ways, says something about who you are.

It's about using many different elements in ways that tell a story or create an environment that you actually want to spend time in. This is where the creative use of rocks can come into the equation.



There are different ways to use rocks. Some people like to use them to border a garden bed and then plant in the bed itself as usual. Though this is fine, I think you miss something if you only use rocks as a border.

The thing about rocks is that they can help you create a space that almost looks like it wasn't created. This might seem strange, but it is all about making an area that almost looks natural, like it was meant to be that way.

Mixing rocks throughout the garden bed not only fills up space, which is sometimes why people use them, but it also creates something for plants to grow over and around and this can look really beautiful. In time, mosses may start to grow over your rocks and this can really give a garden that heritage feeling.

5. Using statues and ornaments

My final idea of how to decoratively show off your plants is to use statues, ornaments, and other decorative features in your garden.

Statues and ornaments are used and chosen for different reasons. Sometimes you want to create a particular *feel*, and so you pick your ornaments to suit this. For example, some people living in coastal regions like to create a beach or coastal vibe and so pick ocean or water-based ornaments. They might place a heap of shells throughout the garden.

Sometimes people are going for a particular garden style, such as a Japanese or Chinese garden.

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Sometimes people will use decorative pots in the garden beds themselves as a way of featuring a plant or they'll hang pots on a wall with a feature plant in it and then have a garden bed down below with other varieties of the same plant or simply plants that go well with that feature variety.

Another way that I have seen ornaments used is as a frame for plants to grow in and around. I once saw a magnificent climbing plant and, rather than having it climb on some boring lattice, they had a great statue of a Picasso style person with many holes through which the climber was enabled to grow up and around the statue.



Part 4 - Five Reasons To Use Raised Garden Beds

Why should you consider using raised garden beds in your garden, particularly if you want to grow vegetables? What are the benefits? I have found raised garden beds to be an invaluable part of my garden design and here is why:

Reason 1 - Raised garden beds reduce the compaction of the soil

Though it is true that plants need good, solid, secure soil to grow in, it is equally true that they need light, air-filled soil to thrive. Raised garden beds, by nature, have soil that is much less compacted than general garden spaces. This is partially because when you build a raised garden bed, you have to fill it and this naturally reduces how compacted the soil is.

It also remains less compacted because you have no need to walk in the garden bed, so the soil will maintain a level of looseness. This enables more air to be trapped and maintained in the soil, which plant roots need to survive. Also, as the soil sinks down you are more likely to re-fill the bed because you can see that it has sunk, providing new, fresh, light soil for plants to thrive in.

Reason 2 - Raised garden beds are easier to use

Raised garden beds are easier to use because the garden bed, being raised, is much closer to you. There is less need to bend down or squat. They are also easier to use, as long as they are designed well, because they bring order to your garden.

Vegetables are generally planted in rows and raised garden beds are easiest built in rectangles. This natural order helps make raised garden beds easier to use.

Reason 3 - Raised garden beds utilise moisture more efficiently

Plants need moisture to survive. Raised garden beds better utilise the water that is available.

Light, fluffy, air-filled soil is generally better at both absorbing large amounts of water and at dissipating, or removing, excess water.



As water seeps into the soil, soil that isn't compacted absorbs what it can and then allows the rest of the water to sink deep down into the soil, which is what is known as drainage.

Most plants need well-draining soils to thrive and raised garden beds encourage this.

Reason 4 - Raised garden beds help plants grow for longer periods of time

Another aspect of many plants, in particular vegetables, is that they generally prefer to grow in warm (note warm, not hot) soils. Raised garden beds tend to warm up quicker but also tend to not overheat (unless the raised bed is made of metal).

Because they tend to warm easier, it means the natural gardening seasons can be slightly extended because the soil will warm better than in normal garden beds. Raised garden beds better use the available sunlight.

Reason 5 - Providing organic matter and fertiliser is easier and more efficient

With raised garden beds, your garden is very clearly defined. You also generally tend to use all the space in a raised garden bed. This means that all the organic matter that you add and all the fertiliser you provide go into growing healthy plants. When using a garden bed that is level with the surrounding areas, nutrients from the organic matter and fertiliser that you add can leach away into surrounding areas which don't necessarily need nutrients. This also means that you do not need to water or fertilise the paths, just within the beds themselves, allowing your plants access to the nutrients that they need and not wasting water or fertiliser.

Raised garden bed for growing vegetables

If you are keen on growing vegetables, I very strongly recommend you consider using raised garden beds. It is said that an average, 4-5 person family could grow all the vegetables they need for a year with six 1.5m² beds.

For most places this is probably more than you can fit, but most places could fit two to three of this size and even in two to three beds you can grow a lot of vegetables. Why not consider installing a raised garden bed or three soon?

The Last Word on Garden Design

Designing a garden involves many elements. It involves plant choice, garden bed design, creativity, and is one of the best aspects of gardening! My rule of thumb with garden design is that being creative is a good idea. I like an ordered garden design but not necessary a square or rectangular one.

This is the great thing: *you* get to design *your* garden. Even if you have limited space or pre-defined garden beds, you can still lay some shape to how they look, what grows in them and more. Gardeners don't view garden design as a challenge, they view it as an opportunity to experiment. So, hop out there and try something new. If it works, wonderful. If not, learn from it and try again.

Chapter 2

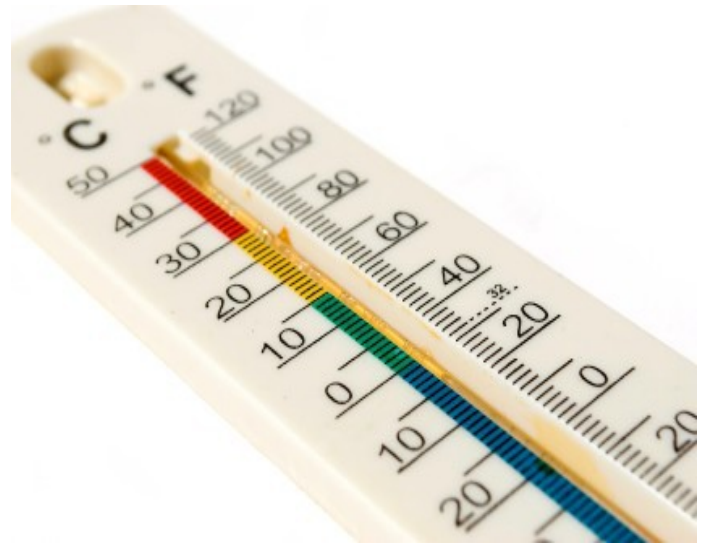
Understanding Your Climate



Introduction to Understanding Your Climate

When it comes to gardening, one of the most important things that you need to know and understand is which climate you live in and what that means for your garden.

Around the world there are many different classifications of climate and any given country could have between one and seven different climate zones, or even more in some classification systems.



What is the big deal? Why do you need to know if you are in a cold or tropical zone? What difference does it really make?

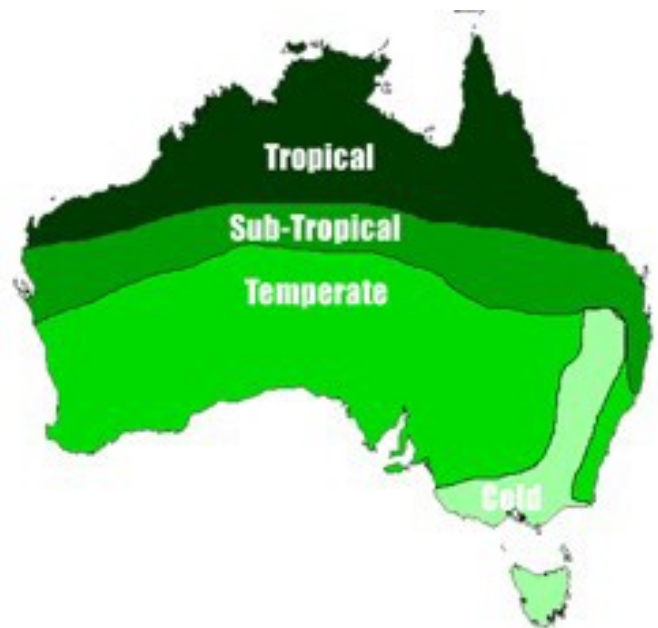
The answer to that question is actually quite simple; the climate that you live in will make a big difference in what you can and can't grow in your garden. It can also even effect when you can and can't grow things. Most plants have a preferred climate and some just won't grow outside of their preferred climate, or will struggle to take hold. In order for you to have success in your garden, you need to plant shrubs and trees which are suited to your climate, and to do this you need to know and understand the climate you live in.

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In Australia it is generally accepted that there are three to four different climates. Tropical, Sub-Tropical, Temperate and Cold. In many instances the tropical and sub-tropical climates are lumped together as one and this is how I have chosen to tackle them. This is mostly because the differences between them can be very small.

Although the climate will still differ throughout these zones depending on where you are within them, the differences are subtle enough that you can generally work under the assumption that what *your* tropical area requires is very similar to what another tropical area requires.

On the right you will see a very rough climate map of Australia. This is not exactly precise but it will give you a pretty good idea of what climate you are in, as long as you can work out where your town is roughly located. If you are close to a boundary then you will probably experience slight variations between the two climates around the area. You'll see I have included the sub-tropical zone in the picture. For the rest of this chapter the sub-tropical and tropical zones will be included as one.



Part 1 - Understanding a Temperate Climate Zone

First I am going to discuss the climate that I know best: Temperate. This is because, technically, I have spent my 26 years living in temperate zones.

I have spent my time in two very different places, one of which could almost be defined as a cold climate and the other which is definitely very temperate.

What makes a temperate climate?

Temperate regions generally exist between the tropical regions (which exist between the tropics) and the colder regions, which are generally either close to or are influenced by the poles (or other things such as mountain ranges). Another word for temperate is moderate and this is a fairly good description of a temperate zone.

Characteristics of a temperate climate in Australia

- Hot, dry summers
- Cool, wet winters
- Generally, 4 relatively distinct seasons, though the range in change may be small.
- Small amounts or no frost

What you experience in a temperate zone may differ from this, however as a general rule this can be followed with good success.

What is the effect on gardening?

One of the major effects temperate zones have on gardening is the necessity of getting your garden ready for summer. Most temperate zones in Australia experience a hot, dry summer and this can really take its toll on plants. Being able to provide some make-shift summer shade may be very important for your garden's survival. It also makes mulching your garden all the more important.

One of the substantial upsides, from my experience with temperate gardening, is that you can actually get most things to grow. Yes, there will be some native tropical plants that won't do amazingly well outside of the humid conditions of the tropics, but even then they will often still grow and you can often build hot houses to make this work. You can also grow year round in temperate zones.

The four relatively distinct seasons of summer, autumn, winter and spring have a definite effect on gardening as well. Depending on the seasonal conditions, various plants will flower at different times. Spring is a very common season in Australia for wildflowers to bloom. They pick up the warming weather as winter ends and start to bloom. These different seasons also provide conditions for fairly different vegetable crops. To get broccoli to grow well, for example, you really have to plant them in autumn for a winter harvest. Planting them in spring will usually see them keel over when the summer sun starts to heat up.

As long as you choose your plants well, take note of how much sun they will get in summer, provide the appropriate shade and water, gardening in temperate zones is quite easy and fun!

Part 2 - Understanding a Cold Climate Zone

Though I have not technically lived in a cold climate, the country town that I spent 10 years in as a child would be right on the border of temperate and cold, if it weren't right on the coast. Its climate is regularly compared to Tasmania, a cold climate. Therefore, I have a pretty good grasp on how the cooler temperate location I grew up in would correspond to an actual cold Australian climate.

What makes a cold climate?

Cold climates are generally influenced by their proximity to either the North or South pole, though there are other things which can cause a colder climate, such as mountain ranges. This is why there is an odd shaped cold climate region on the east coast of Australia, right around the great dividing range. The southernmost part of the East Coast of Australia is also considered to be a cold climate.

What is considered a cold climate in Australia and what is considered a cold climate in other parts of the world does also vary but one of the main considerations for a place to be considered a cold climate is that it receives snow. Now granted, the snow that cold climates receive in Australia is minimal compared to other places around the world, however this is still a consideration.

This does not mean that everywhere that is considered cold receives snow. Melbourne city rarely, if ever, receives snow but the mountain ranges in Victoria are covered. Parts of Tasmania and also the Blue Mountains in NSW also receive large portions of snow throughout winter and this is partially why they are considered cold climates.

Characteristics of a cold climate in Australia

- Warm, mildly wet summers (compared to Temperate regions)
- Cold, wet winters
- Frosts are pretty much guaranteed
- Some parts experience snow

What is the effect on gardening?

The key word for this climate is cold. If a plant is going to survive in a cold climate it has to be able to acclimatise to cold weather, meaning it must be able to survive frosts and many plants just can't do this. Plants which are native to and thrive in the hot, humid rainforests of the tropics are probably going to struggle if they have to cope with snow. A lot of plants that thrive in cold conditions do so by dropping their leaves in winter and going into a dormant state. These plants are called deciduous plants. As Australia's cold climate is actually quite mild in world comparisons, we have very few plants that are truly deciduous, but many do limit their growth throughout the cooler months. This is mostly important if you want to plant shrubs or trees from other countries; deciduous shrubs and trees would likely do well in a cold climate.

A big benefit to this climate is that it generally experiences more rain than does a temperate climate, which means plants don't have to worry as much about conserving water. There are many varieties endemic to a colder climate which, though thriving during the winter in a temperate zone, really struggle during summer due to the reduced rain fall, or, as is probably more true, rain fall over fewer days. Much of Australia's temperate zones receives as much rain as the cold areas, they just receive it in big bursts where as colder climates often have more days of light rain.

Part 3 - Understanding a Tropical Climate Zone

Firstly I want to give a bit of an explanation as to what makes a tropical climate so you can better understand the tropics if you live in this region. Now, a disclaimer: I have not lived in the tropics myself so much of the information I am sharing about this particular region is from my few visits to a tropical area and my own research and discussions that I have had with gardeners who live in a tropical or sub- tropical region.

What makes a tropical climate?

Very generally, tropical climates are found around the equator, between the Tropic of Cancer (Northern Tropic) and the Tropic of Capricorn (Southern Tropic).

Within this zone there are variations of climate, with up to as many as 4 distinct zones, however this region can still be discussed as a whole and still be correct.

Characteristics of a tropical climate in Australia

For this discussion, I am focusing solely on the Tropical environments found in Australia. As we are further from the equator, the Australian tropics experience slightly different conditions to countries that exist on, and directly surrounding, the equator.

- Generally 2 seasons, a wet and a dry season
- Wet season generally corresponds with *summer* in the rest of Australia
- Cooler, drier winter
- High humidity all year round, though more so in the wet season

However, what people in Far North Queensland experience and what people living in towns bordering the temperate zone experience will be slightly different, but these characteristics usually hold true to any tropical area of Australia.

What is the effect on gardening?

For plants to survive in the tropics, they have to be able to handle a lot of moisture. Both a lot of moisture in the air and often a lot of moisture in the soil. As such, many plants which require really good draining soils will struggle in tropical climates.

There are also many fruits and vegetables, like bananas and pineapples, for example, which actually require a tropical environment to thrive. Try and grow a banana tree in a temperate zone; you may get it to grow, but they will rarely produce a bumper crop.



Another thing about tropical gardening is that a lot of native tropical plants are used to either form a canopy or exist under a canopy. What does this mean? In a forest there are many different layers of life and the word canopy refers to the upper most part, where the tops of the trees are.

They form a canopy, or umbrella over the forest, often either stopping or filtering the light from getting down below. Some tropical plants create this canopy and some need to live under one. If you were to take a shrub that needs the canopy of a tropical zone and plant it in the blazing sun in a temperate zone, it will wilt. Many ferns are an example of this.

This is a really basic explanation of a tropical climate but I hope it will help you understand your tropical garden, whether you find yourself living in a tropical zone **or** you are doing your best to recreate a tropical zone in a different climate. This is possible, just can be quite difficult and would be more appropriate for the experienced gardener.

The Last Word on Understanding Your Climate

Hopefully this has helped you to better understand the climate that you live in and will help you make good plant choices for your garden. As you become more experienced, you will discover that some of these rules I have spoken about are actually possible to break. I am a very experimental gardener and even when I am told 'that won't work,' I often have to find out for myself.

Many gardeners expel a lot of energy making sure they understand the nitty gritty of their zone before they do anything. As I said, I am a lot more experimental. In fact, it wasn't until I was about 20 that I even began to *consider* how my climate really affected my gardening.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Understanding the basics of your climate is important though. The tips I have given here could be considered the absolute basics. You will learn more as you go, but don't let your limited understanding stop you from experimenting and working out a lot of how climate will affect you in time. Know which climate you live in, how that will limit your selection of plants.

There is a saying that goes "rules were made to be broken." This is actually true in my opinion in gardening; it is just that you need to understand why the rules are there in the first place to best understand why they can be broken. I know people who grow amazing tropical plants in some of the coolest regions of Australian.

Equally, I have heard of cold loving plants thriving in the tropics. My Grandma used to have an amazing green house which grew much like a tropical rainforest in a temperate zone.

Learn the rules of climates, follow them, and then as you get more confident you will learn where you can go against the grain and get something to grow that otherwise probably should not.

Chapter 3

Understanding Your Soil



Introduction to Understanding Your Soil

To have a thriving garden, like so many of us crave, it is very important to ensure that everything is just right. The sun needs to be right, the shade needs to be right, the climate needs to be right, and the wind needs to be right.

But, very importantly, the soil needs to be right.



I have had a lot of people ask me “what makes soil good?” The answer is actually a little subjective because some plants actually require more specific types of soil.

Some like more alkaline, some like more acidic. Some prefer coastal limestone based soils, others prefer more clay based soils.

Is there such thing as a perfect soil? I would suggest no, there is no perfect soil. However, as a general rule, there is such a thing as *good soil* and yes, it is attainable for you! Understanding what makes good soil and how to take the soil you have and improve it are key concepts in becoming a better gardener.

Let's start by explaining what good soil actually is.

Part 1 - What Makes Good Soil

Basically, when it comes to soil, there are two main ingredients with a few others added to the mix in smaller doses. The main two ingredients are sand and clay. All soil will be a mix of various parts of sand and clay. Soils with more sand in them will be lighter, more grainy, and if you pick it up in your hand, will easily run through your fingers. Soils with more clay will be heavier, absorb more water, stick together more, and if you pick it up, will stick to your hands a lot more.

In addition to sand and clay, in soils, are various other minerals such as limestone, sulphur, and the like. Organic matter also plays a very important role in determining what your soil is like. Generally speaking, it is the organic matter which binds together the sand particles and the clay particles.

What is the mix in good soil?

A soil can be considered *good* when it has particular levels of sand, clay, organic matter, and another ingredient called silt. This good soil has a name and that is *loam*.

There are slight variations in what is considered as loam: you can have light or heavy loam, there are just small differences in the overall make up.

For the purposes of this article, good soil is a medium loam, that is, right in the middle of heavy and light loams.

So You Want a Better Garden?

As a general rule of thumb, a medium loam has the following ingredients;

- 10% Course sand
- 45% Fine sand
- 20% Silt
- 15% Clay
- 10% Organic matter & moisture

These percentages are just approximations as the percentages may vary slightly depending on the type and quality of products you use, but they give you an idea of what it takes to make good, healthy soil.

What makes this consistency of soil *good*?

What characteristics does this consistency of soil have which makes it good? Loam is considered good because, though it drains really well, which roots like because it limits root rot, the soil is able to absorb a good amount of water which gives plants access to water when needed.

This consistency also helps lock in various nutrients. Loam also keeps a good temperature, not getting too hot in summer and not getting too cold in winter. This is all because this mix of ingredients happens to work well together to allow plants to thrive.

Part 2 - Improving Your Soil Consistency

How do you improve your soil? This is actually quite a complex question because, though I have explained loam, I have still only explained it in a basic way. There are other considerations in actually making a good loam or turning your damaged soil into loam. You need to make sure the pH levels are right for what you want to plant. You have to make sure you have enough fertiliser or nutrients in the soil for your plants to do well and then, of course, you have to make sure it is a good mix as described above.

What is the problem with soils that have too much sand?

The positive to soils with a lot of sand is that they drain water really well. The problem is that fine and coarse sand are not very good at keeping any water in place to be accessible for your plants to use. Overall, if your soil has too little clay to absorb moisture, it won't matter how much you water your garden, it won't keep enough water for your plants to access.

Sand also allows nutrients to leech away with the water, meaning that your plants don't have access to the minerals that they need to grow in a healthy manner.

Nutrients gets locked in by clay because it is sticky. This makes it accessible to your plants whenever it is needed. However, if you have sandy soil, not only is there not enough clay to hold the nutrients in, but the water will drain through faster, often washing the nutrients down through the soil with it.

Fixing sandy soils

Generally speaking, if you pick up the soil in your hand and it runs through your fingers really quickly, you need to add some clay particles. This does *not* mean you go out and buy a big wad of clay and throw it into your garden, the process is a little more refined.

The best way to improve sandy soils is to regularly add lots of organic matter, such as manures and composts. These will enable your soil to lock in nutrients and allow your plants to once again get what they need. Also apply a general, all- purpose fertiliser to the mix. I prefer slow release fertilisers because these allow the nutrients to be added to your soil over time, as it improves.

To really improve your sandy soil, add a 30L bag of manure per square metre every 4-6 weeks. Make sure you dig it in to the existing soil, allowing the sand to mix with the organic matter. Adding some minerals to your sandy soil is also often a good idea. Most local nurseries will be able to point you in the right direction as to what minerals you should add in your area, they generally know what it is lacking.

What is the problem with soils that have too much clay?

As you can probably guess, the problem with clay soils is the opposite. Clay soils absorb and keep a lot of water which can actually cause plants problems. Though roots need to have access to water, they don't like to be immersed in water (unless they are water plants) as they need to be able to breathe.

Soils with too much clay can also dry out, or almost bake during hot summers. If the clay has effectively baked, it is no longer able to absorb as much water. Now, clay can be moistened again if it gets enough water, but plants require nutrients on a regular basis and not just when the clay soil has been re-moistened. They need to be able to access water as required.

Clay based soils do a good job of keeping nutrients, but they often lock them in so well that it becomes difficult for plants to access because the clay holds on to them so well. Also, as clay particles are often very small, when there is too much clay it can pack together really tightly. This can limit the growth of roots which, again, will limit access to water and nutrients for your plants.

Fixing clay soils

If you have the opposite problem, you pick up your soil and it just sticks really thick to your fingers *or* it is very hard to dig into your soil because it seems rock hard, you likely have too much clay. This might seem strange but the way to fix a clay soil is very similar to sandy soils, add organic matter. Organic matter in this instance helps to break apart the clay particles, allowing roots to penetrate deeper and allowing the clay to once again absorb water and nutrients, providing your plants roots access to what they need. Once again, this process requires time and effort. With clay soil you need to till it in deeper, really mix up and break up the soil so that the organic matter can interact best with the clay in the soil.

pH testing

Another really good idea for a beginner is to take a pH test of your soil. pH is a measurement of the alkalinity or acidity of soil and is measured on a scale of 0-14. If something has a pH of 0 it means it is highly acidic. If something has a pH of 14 it is highly alkaline. Between 0 and 14 is a sliding scale from acidic to alkaline.

So You Want a Better Garden?

With soil, the pH generally falls between a minimum of 3 (very acidic) and a maximum of 10 (very alkaline) if it sustains life. However most plants require a pH around 6 to 7. If they like it slightly acidic, then it'll need to be around 5. If it needs to be more alkaline then around 8. Plants don't generally like extremes in any area.

To make a soil more acidic you need to add sulphur to your soil. Plants like blueberries like an acidic soil (between 4 and 5). To make a soil more alkaline you need to add limestone to the soil. When adding these, the packs you buy them in will often tell you how much you add to change the pH of your soil. Also, this is not a necessarily quick process. It can take a few months or longer for sulphur to effectively lower pH because it requires bacteria to help the process along. If you know you want to plant something in spring that will require better acidity, then start applying sulphur in summer.

I often improve my soils acidity while it already has my plants in it. The only reason this is an issue is because, without optimal soil pH, the plant will require a little more tender loving care. So it is possible to improve soil pH **and** plant simultaneously, it just means a little more work.

Most local hardware stores stock a range of very simple-to-use pH testing kits. Regardless of whether you know what your plants need to thrive, at least knowing your soil pH is beneficial. Buy a soil testing kit and take a sample from the various different garden beds that you have. Each bed will likely have a different pH level; it is highly unlikely that it will be standard across your entire garden. Then, when you know what you want to plant, check with your local nursery for what pH they need so that you can properly prepare your soil for what you want to plant.

Part 3 - Improving the Water Situation in Your Soil

Living in Australia or any other country with hot, dry summers (in cold and temperate climates), it is pivotal to pay particular attention to water retention and absorption in soils.

Though I say this is for hot, dry summers it can also be very relevant for tropical zones because you need to make sure your garden can absorb the summer rains.



There is so much more to watering your garden than just applying water. There are three key questions to ask to ensure your garden best utilises the water you apply.

- 1) Can the water break through the top soil and reach your plants roots **or** does it just run off the top?
- 2) Can water drain freely through your soil so that your plants don't 'drown?'
- 3) Does your garden retain enough water, after draining, for your plants to have access to water when required?

What tends to happen throughout summer in Australia is the top soil forms a crust which limits the ability of water to penetrate through to the roots. This is caused by various minerals knitting together under the baking summer sun. Even when this problem is dealt with, water may still not provide relief for your plants if it is either not retained in your soil **or** if too much is retained.

Sandy soils tend to drain a lot of water, which can deprive plants of required moisture. Soils with a high clay content can maintain too much water, not allowing it to drain and effectively can cause your plants to drown as roots don't like to be completely surrounded by water; they need access to the minerals and fertiliser in the soil.

So how do you ensure that your garden is best able to utilise the water that you apply? Well, there are 4 simple things that you can do to help, and they are:

1. Use a fork to aerate the soil

This allows more air to get down into the soil which also allows for the soil to deal more efficiently with water. This also helps break down the crust that forms on the top soil. This is great for large grassed areas. Simply take your garden fork and systematically work your way around your gardens and lawn areas. Stick your fork in the ground, wiggle it around a bit, pull it out and then repeat on a new section.

2. Apply a soil wetting agent

Regularly applying a soil wetting agent helps to completely break down the crust on the top layer of soil. Once a month or once every six weeks throughout summer is a good idea. Wetta soil is my wetting agent of choice, but there are many good ones. To my knowledge there aren't any that cause any issues in your garden as the chemicals used are garden friendly, but always read the label to make sure.

Sometimes you need to refrain from eating garden produce for a period of time after applying various chemicals to your garden.

3. Bury gel water crystals around the roots of your plants

Gel water crystals absorb water and slowly release it into the soil as the soil dries. This will significantly boost your soil's water retention without causing the roots of your plants to be surrounded by water. Win, Win!

4. Mulch, mulch, mulch

The single best investment you could make for your garden is to mulch it. As mulch is generally light and organic, it locks in a lot of water below the mulch and in the soil, keeping more moisture available for your plants. It also limits evaporation, due to the fact it is loose. Top soil is notorious for allowing the sun to steal its water; mulch minimises this loss. Read more about mulching in the common gardening tasks section of this ebook.

These four simple steps will significantly boost water drainage in your garden while also increasing your soil's ability to retain water in the right ways. If you manage your garden well, there is no reason why it cannot survive an Australia summer or any other hot, dry climate, even under strict sprinkler restrictions like we tend to have all over Australia.

The Last Word on Understanding Your Soil

As soil varies so much around Australia there is no 'one size fits all' approach to improving your soil. Even differences between the coast in inland parts of your own state may mean a slightly different approach. However, this is just one reason to consider growing plants endemic to your area, which I will discuss more in chapter 6 on choosing plants. Briefly though, if a plant is endemic to your area it means it naturally occurs there, or at least has in the past. This means it is likely best suited to your local soil and will therefore require less on your part in terms of soil preparation.

Chapter 4

Buying Gardening Tools



Introduction to Buying Gardening Tools

What gardening tools do you need? This is a pretty simple question that anyone who has a garden wants to know the answer to. Other questions you might be asking are:

“what do I look for when buying tools?” or “how much can I expect to spend?” These questions are particularly important if you have just decided to get into gardening.

Having the right tools can make a very big difference when it comes to doing the work.

If the work is easier, the chances are you'll stick to your goals of growing a better garden! The problem is, if you are new to gardening you probably don't *know* what to buy. Even some people who have been gardening for years have been doing so using tools not designed for the job they are applying them to.

Many people get to this stage, jump online and scour the internet for hours trying to find out everything they need to know. Look no further! Here I will outline the top 8 tools that I believe every gardener should and look at another handy tool for the slightly more serious gardener out there. I have also included a section here on the attire to wear when gardening.



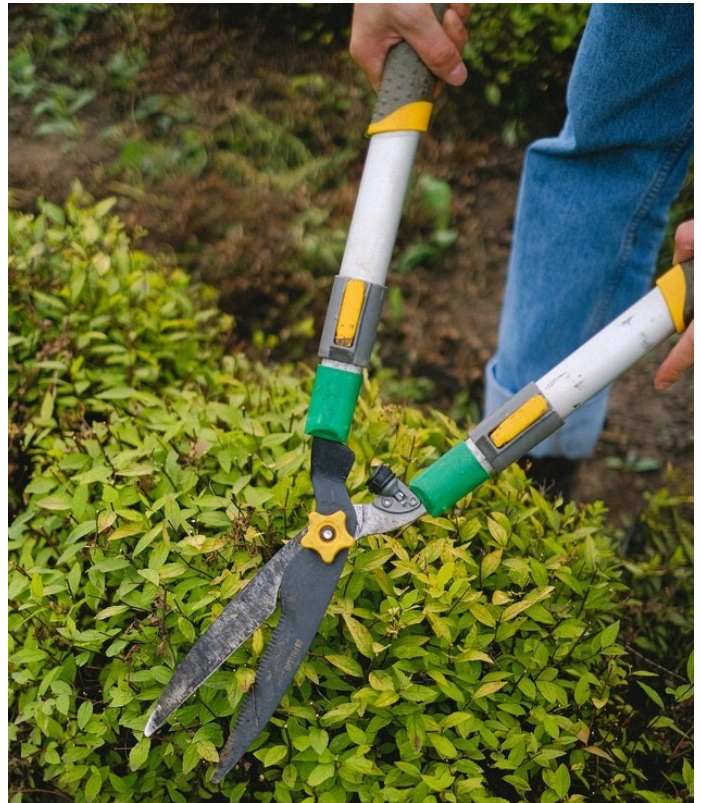
Tool 1 - Hedge Shears

The first tool I am going to give an overview of are called hedge shears or sometimes called hedge clippers. I have chosen this tool to overview first is because I have made rookie mistakes when buying hedge shears. A while back, I had a \$20 gift voucher and I made the mistake of settling for an inferior variety that didn't cost all of my voucher. As I should have expected, they didn't even last through their first use before the shaft bent, placing the blades out of whack.

What is the function of hedge shears?

The main function of hedge shears is in shearing or trimming hedges. Most shrubs need trimming at some point so as to stop them from taking over your garden and the best manual tool for the job is hedge shears.

When it comes to buying hedge shears, it really is true that you get what you paid for. As a general rule (and it is **very** general) when I go to a shop I wouldn't even **consider** the cheapest two options.



This is just a **personal** rule (which I violated with bad results) that usually saves me from anguish. I am yet to buy either the cheapest or second cheapest hedge shears and not have them become pretty much useless in a short amount of time.

What to look for in a pair of hedge shears

1) Is the blade sharp? It is hard to test this without feeling the blade (*very carefully*) but you can get a rough idea of its sharpness by gently touching the blade. It *should not* feel smooth; if it feels smooth then it is already slightly flat and won't get better with use!

2) Are the blades curved? Curved blades help stop branches slipping down the blade as you cut, giving you better results when cutting.

3) Are the handles strong? I myself prefer wooden handles simply because I know that they are strong, however, if you want a lighter tool, try and find a hedge trimmer with handles made of carbon fibres or something similar. I try and stay away from aluminium handles because they bend more easily when force is applied.

Finally, shears are not designed to cut thick branches, they are designed to trim the foliage of hedge plants. A general rule is don't try and cut branches thicker than your thumb, for that you'll need a tool called a lopper, another of the tools I'll review.

Cost of hedge shears

A cheap pair of sturdy hedge shears will set you back *at least* \$20. If you're paying less, you are probably buying the cheapest or next to cheapest tool. An expensive pair of shears will be in excess of \$100. A good range is probably within the \$40-\$50 price range. Very rarely will you buy a tool for that price that doesn't back up its cost for general use. If you are running a gardening business, you may like to consider buying a more expensive model designed for higher use.

Tool 2 - Secateurs

3 Kinds of secateurs

When it comes to gardening you really won't get far without a good pair of secateurs. But what makes secateurs good? What should you look for when you are shopping for secateurs? One thing many gardeners don't know is that there are actually three different kinds of secateurs: Anvil, Bypass and Parrot Beak.

- Anvil secateurs have an upper blade that pushes down onto a flat lower anvil.
- Parrot Beak secateurs have two blades which cut by meeting together in the middle and look like a parrot's beak.
- The third kind of secateurs are called Bypass secateurs. They work by having two blades which bypass each other in a similar way to scissors.

The big difference between Bypass and Parrot Beak secateurs is the shape of the blades: Parrot Beak having two identical blades compared to Bypass which has one large and one small blade, the large blade being convex in shape and the small blade being concave in shape.

Bypass secateurs are the main type used and sold in Australia and will be the focus of this entry.

What to look for in a pair of secateurs

When buying secateurs there are a few things to consider. One of the most important things to check out is how they feel in your hand. When you are out shopping, pick up a few pairs and see how they feel. Feel for weight and feel for grip. Most secateurs handles will be shaped with little divots for your fingers to go in, find the pair with divots that best fit your hand.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Another key tip is to make sure the secateurs you are keen on have a safety latch that is easily engaged and disengaged with one hand. When you are pruning a plant, if you have to stop and use two hands to engage the safety latch, it is more likely that you won't use it at all. It might sound simple but a safety latch is only useful if it is likely to be put to use.



Try and look for secateurs with plastic covered metal handles. Metal handles are strong but are cold to work with while plastic handles are a sign of cheap manufacturing and are not likely to last as well as metal handles. There are also a growing number of carbon fibre handles now and these are fantastic.

There are three different blade types: stainless steel, coated steel, and carbon steel. My preference is for stainless steel but carbon steel works well too. Either of these kinds will stay the sharpest for longer periods of time.

The only real upside to coated steel is that it cleans more easily. Cleaning your secateurs after use is extremely important but having blades that remain sharp are better for the job at hand.

The general rule of thumb with secateurs is: don't try cutting plant limbs that are thicker than your thumb. If you try and cut limbs that are too thick you will damage the blade and therefore your tool that you have invested in will not last as well for as long. The best tool for limbs thicker than your thumb is a lopper.

Cost of secateurs

Prices range from \$5-\$10 at the cheap end right up to \$150-\$200. Again for a household gardener I'd say you could probably get a pair that will work for \$20-\$40 but a good pair at around \$50 may well last you a decade or more. My Grandma had a pair that I know was much older than I was when I was 10.

Tool 3 - Loppers

So far I have discussed how secateurs and hedge shears are good for trimming or pruning the skinny limbs of plants but there are times when pruning involves the removal of limbs thicker than your thumb. If you trim these with secateurs or hedge shears you risk damaging the tool and it is for this very reason that loppers are a must-own tool for you.

Types of loppers

Similar to secateurs, there are a few kinds of loppers but, once again, the most prevalent are called bypass loppers, named after the style of the blade used.

However, there is another decision to be made with loppers and that is whether to buy loppers that have a ratchet action or not.

Ratchet loppers basically cut the limb in stages, allowing the best leverage possible with minimal effort. If you plan on regularly cutting decent width limbs or if you don't have a lot of strength in your hands then I strongly recommend looking for loppers with a ratchet action. This is more costly but will save you a lot of time and effort.



What to look for in a lopper

The two most important things to take into account when buying loppers, after you have decided which type you want, is weight and handle length. What you want will depend entirely on your circumstances.

If you plan to trim plants with limbs that are quite high up then you will need to buy loppers either with longer natural handles *or* with the ability to be lengthened. You will want to have light handles, probably made of a slightly strengthened aluminium, so you don't tire quite too quickly while working.

Make sure you check that the blade is sharp. Again, check this very carefully with your thumb. The very edge of the blade should not feel smooth but should feel sharp. It should almost feel like if you were to push harder it could cut you.

Cost of a lopper

Garden loppers normally range in price from \$15 to \$150, but I wouldn't touch a pair cheaper than \$30 and would probably look at the tools in the \$50-\$60 range. If you make the right decision with lopper purchase, the tool quite possibly will last you for life. Good garden loppers that are not made of metals that are likely to rust really do tend to handle the life of a garden tool well.

Tool 4 - Garden trowel

What is a garden trowel you might ask? Isn't that a picture of a hand shovel? Well, it all depends! I actually had a hard time naming this tool because if there is a garden tool that has many names then what I've grown up calling a little shovel is it!

Hand shovel, trowel, little shovel, little spade, digger— these are just a few of the various names. However what they all have in common is that they refer to one of the most important tools in a gardeners shed. Whether it be digging up weeds or planting new plants, you won't get too far without using a garden trowel.

What to look for in a garden trowel

What makes a good garden trowel? What should you be looking for when you go down to your local gardening tools shop to purchase a hand shovel? Does it really matter which one you buy?

There are basically only two parts to a hand shovel, the handle and the blade and both are very important considerations when looking to buy a trowel.

Many people go out and buy a cheap garden trowel, take it home, start digging, and find that the blade is as malleable as the soil they are digging in. Though a garden trowel with a warped blade can usually still do the job, it isn't nearly as efficient.

So You Want a Better Garden?

To ensure a long lasting trowel blade make sure you buy a trowel with a blade made of metal, not plastic. Steel blades are the best, but I have had some success with blades made of an aluminium alloy. This all depends on the composition of aluminium to alloy.



What I do to test them is: I place a little force on the blade to see how strong it feels. Be careful obviously because you don't want it to actually bend in the store; you can usually get a feel for the strength of the blade without actually damaging it. Of course, if it does feel like the blade would bend easily from the small force you are placing on it, imagine what some tough soil or a root could do?

When it comes to the handle it is all about comfort. You will likely spend many an hour in the garden with your trusty garden trowel in hand; you want it to be comfortable. This also takes into account why you shouldn't buy a trowel with a plastic handle. It isn't very strong and they don't tend to be high on the comfort stakes. A good rubber coated metal handle is what I find to be best, though there are a few other coverings to metal handles you might find and they are normally okay as well.

Try and find a trowel that has grooves in place for your fingers and check that the grooves match your hand. Having said this, some people prefer a handle without grooves. The key here is choosing one that feels comfortable to you.

Cost of a garden trowel

As far as cost goes, the best trowel I have ever had actually only cost \$10. Trowels are one tool that many people have had luck with at cheap prices.

As per usual though, spending more around that \$30-\$50 price range will increase your chances of your chosen garden trowel lasting your lifetime, but if you find a cheap trowel that passes all the above tests, buy it!

Tool 5 - Spades & Shovels

Spades and shovels are one of the most used tools when it comes to gardening. They serve a variety of purposes: from breaking soil to shifting compost, from mixing concrete to shovelling leaves. What has always amazed me, though, is many people's inability to name a spade a spade. Even I, up until about the age of 15, didn't really 'get' the difference between a spade and a shovel, so let me clear up the difference first.

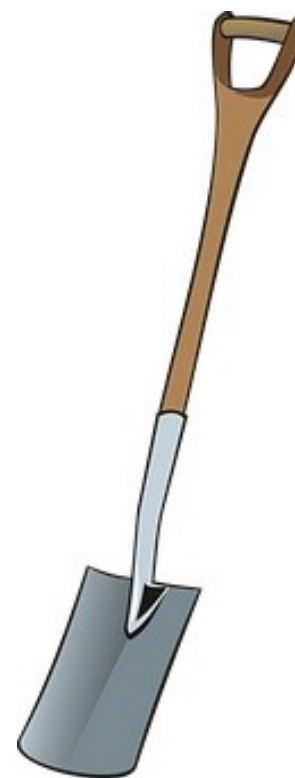
In doing so, it must be pointed out that these are *general* guidelines. The reason why spades and shovels get confused is because there is often very little difference, but here are some fairly common differences. Let's take a look.

What exactly is a spade?

A spade generally has a relatively flat blade. Spades usually have straight edges and also usually have shorter handles than shovels.

Spades are better suited to moving things like soil, sand, and mulch than they are to digging. This sometimes seems counter-intuitive because a spade's blade is generally smaller than a shovel and you would think bigger blade equals better moving capacity. The problem with this is sometimes moving bigger piles means more strain. Small handles and a smaller blade allow for more efficient moving, causing you to tire slower and lessen the risk of injury.

Spades are also good for defining edges given that most spades have a straight blade.



What exactly is a shovel?

A shovel usually has a longer handle, though short handle varieties are available.

Shovels usually have a rounded or pointed blade, though the square blade shovel is growing in popularity.

The blade of a shovel are generally wider than a spade and are capable of moving more soil in one go, but, as mentioned before, this isn't necessarily always good.

Shovels are the tool of choice for digging deep holes, hence the long handles. This is also the main reason behind having a larger blade.



Which one to buy first?

Different gardeners will recommend different things but my recommendation is to buy a spade first.

Spades tend to be more versatile than shovels and are easier to use in tight spaces. Also, unless you plan to dig holes a metre or deeper, a spade will do the job for you.

Shovels are more specialised tools, spades more general.

Cost of spades and shovels

If there is one tool that I recommend you splurge a bit on, it is when you buy a spade and/or a shovel.

This is one tool that you really want to be purchasing for life. I grew up using the same spade that my Dad bought at a young age. He still owns and uses that spade today.

Spades and shovels are one of the most commonly used tools and the jobs they are used for are almost always heavy duty. It is for this reason you want a solid spade or shovel without even the smallest bit of plastic.

When shopping, look for good quality steel or carbon fibre-strengthened spades and shovels. Check anywhere there is a joint. Try flexing the handle and ascertaining where you think weak spots might be and how weak they appear under just a small amount of strain.

A good spade or shovel will quite possibly be upwards of \$50 but it will be the best \$50 you spend on a gardening tool, period.

Tool 6 - Pruning Saw

Another must have tool for any gardener is a pruning saw. Sometimes plant or tree limbs are even too thick for loppers and you need to break out the saw.

In theory, any old saw would do, they all cut wood, but garden pruning saws are designed to work best on living plants.

When living plants are cut, they secrete a sticky residue, or sap and this can cause difficulty for an ordinary saw. Pruning saws are designed with this in mind, made with either non-stick or low-stick teeth that will keep on cutting even when covered by tree sap.

Pruning saws also generally come with a curved handle. This makes getting in and around tree limbs easier which is important because, unless you have shaped your tree, it is often the most difficult to reach or most awkward limbs that you are trying to remove.

Another big bonus of a proper pruning saw over an ordinary saw is size and portability. Pruning saws often fold (though not always) and this is beneficial for 3 reasons;

- Takes up less space.
- Are safer, you won't risk cutting yourself reaching into your gardening tools.
- Helps better protect the teeth, helping the tool to last longer.

What to look for in a pruning saw

The first tip for anyone looking to buy a pruning saw is to spend that little bit extra and get one that folds up and get one which has a replaceable blade. Though pruning saw blades can generally be sharpened, eventually a new blade will be needed. If the blade cannot be replaced, then you will have to spend big again on a new tool. However, if the blade is replaceable, this will significantly cut down the long-term cost of maintaining your pruning saw.

A relatively recent improvement to the pruning saw range are blades called tri-cut. Basically, these are sharpened on 3 edges, like a triangle, and reportedly cut twice as fast. I have never owned a pruning saw with this kind of blade but every review I have read has strongly recommended them, so I'll recommend you look for a pruning saw with a tri-cut blade also.

Once again, try and stay away from pruning saws with lots of plastic pieces. Plastic makes the tool cheaper, but it is also rare for tools with plastic to go the distance and last many years. In fact in many cases, manufacturers make tools out of plastic *because* they won't last for years, forcing you to buy another tool in a couple of years. It makes sense for manufacturers, they need the business, but it is a shame that there are fewer and fewer top quality tools.

Cost of a pruning saw

Pruning saw range in cost from about \$20 right up to \$150. To get a folding pruning saw with a tri-cut blade you are probably looking at a minimum around the \$40 mark. Spending \$60-70 will get you a top notch tool, spending \$30-40 will get you a serviceable tool. Spend less than \$30 and you are probably getting a tool that will last a season or two.

Tool 7 - Garden Fork

One tool that has become less and less common in the gardeners shed in recent years is the garden fork. Garden forks are used for many different tasks. They can be used for shifting mulch and leaves, uprooting difficult plants, and aerating or turning over soil. This is just a few of the tasks that garden forks can be useful for.

What to look for in a garden fork

A lot of the tasks that you would use a garden fork for require a lot of force to be exerted on the tool, so it is imperative that you buy a good quality garden fork.

As garden forks have become less and less popular, the market has been flooded with cheap and nasty alternatives. Just recently I was helping a friend out and was using their tools. The fork was brand new. I placed it into the ground in a common manner, placed a mild amount of force on the tool and the plastic handle snapped right off.

The **best** garden forks are forged. That is, they are made from one solid piece of metal, forged when heated. The very best in my opinion are forged steel with a soft rubber coated handle.

If you are not buying a forged garden fork make sure you check out how many joins the tool has.

Is there a join between the prongs and the shaft? Is there a join between the shaft and the handle? Joins are points of weakness, the more joins there are, the weaker the tool will be.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Many aluminium alloy forks are coming out with extremely high percentages of aluminium in the alloy. Aluminium is a very malleable metal which means it bends and twists easily. Many good tools are made of aluminium alloys *however*, you really need to make sure the alloy has enough other metals to strengthen the tool.



Feel the prongs on the fork, put some pressure on them. If you can bend them yourself (which isn't out of the question with cheap tools today) then just think what using them will do.

Another good choice is handles that are made out of carbon fibre which is fast becoming more popular for manufacturers than metal as it is cheaper to make but maintains similar strength to metal.

Make sure the handle feels comfortable and the shaft is a reasonable length. Short handles make the tool more versatile as it'll be easier to manage in tight spaces but it also means the work will be harder.

Longer handles provide more leverage which can make the job easier, depending on what you are doing, but also make it harder to use in tight spaces. Think about how you will be using the tool and decide what you need most.

Cost of a garden fork

My advice with garden forks is not to buy cheap. As I mentioned above, in recent years, many cheap brands have entered the market and the tools they sell are shocking. The garden fork is one tool that is very commonly made for 'cheap' prices but these tools simply will not stand the test of time. Anything less than \$30-\$40 and I would suggest you are probably throwing your money away.

Having said that, garden forks that are around \$30-\$40 will likely work well. Though a seriously good quality forged fork will set you back around \$60+, a strong mid range fork with 1, maybe 2 joins will probably do the job. Let me re-iterate though, don't buy the cheap imported forks!

Tool 8 - Garden Rake

Here I'll be talking about 2 different types of rakes:

- Leaf rakes, and;
- Garden rakes.

This last type is a little confusing, given it shares its name with the overarching type but I think you'll understand the difference by the end of the chapter.

Leaf Rake

A leaf rake is mostly used for, unsurprisingly, raking up leaves. Some places in the world require leaf rakes more than others but they are generally a useful tool to have. When buying a leaf rake there is one main variable to consider: how light is the rake?



So You Want a Better Garden?

Quite simply, leaves themselves are not heavy so you do not need a heavy duty rake to rake them up. What you do need is a tool that you can use for long periods of time and not tire too easily. Especially during autumn (or fall as American's call it), raking leaves can be a big task and so you want a tool that is light weight, flexible and has a broad head.

You also want very small gaps between the rakes prongs so that leaves can't slip between them. Leaf rakes are about the *only* garden tool that I will recommend buying with plastic parts as plastic heads are generally the lightest and so make for a good leaf rake.

Garden rake

A garden rake is really quite different to both a lawn rake and a leaf rake. A garden rake is usually used in soil, often for moving or levelling soil. This job requires that soil can both be pushed by the rake but the rake should not provide too much resistance.



A garden rake has fewer prongs on the head and they are spread out more. Lawn and leaf rakes have long prongs that mostly go in the same direction as the handle where as a garden rake has prongs that are totally on a 90 degree angle.

Garden rakes need to be sturdy and they need to be made of really solid materials. A good garden rake is like a good garden spade or shovel, if you buy the right one it really could last for life. Don't scrimp when it comes to choosing a garden rake!

Cost of rakes

Leaf Rakes

This is definitely the cheapest as far as rakes go, and probably the only garden tool I'll recommend where you can buy the cheapest tool available. It will probably be okay *as long as* you only use it for its purpose: raking leaves. The more expensive leaf rakes only cost more because they improve the ease of use or are slightly lighter. Still, a \$10 leaf rake will usually do the job.

Garden Rake

This is the most costly rake. A budget garden rake still shouldn't be less than \$25 and a solid garden rake will probably set you back \$30+. Spending \$40-\$50 will make it more likely that you are buying a tool for life.

Advanced Tool - Electric Hedge Trimmer

This is a tool for the slightly more serious gardener but can be a very handy addition to your tool box. A hedge trimmer is used to lightly prune hedges and shrubs to keep them looking neat.

The job can be done very well with manual shears and I prefer the control and feel provided by manual shears, but for ongoing maintenance of medium to large gardens, an electric trimmer can significantly reduce the time it takes to maintain a garden.



What to look for in an electric hedge trimmer

The very first consideration to make when buying an electric hedge trimmer is how do you want your trimmer to be powered? There are 3 options and each option will suit a very different clientele: Petrol, Battery or Electric power cord.

Petrol Electric Hedge Trimmer

Petrol trimmers are usually the best choice for high use. They have the freedom of a battery powered hedge trimmer and the power of an electric chord powered trimmer. Obviously they need to be refuelled every now and then but this is less frequent than how often battery operated trimmers need to be recharged. Simply put, petrol electric trimmers are the 'best' but because of this they are also the most expensive. Really, unless you are running a gardening business or have a vast backyard that doesn't allow the use of a power chord, you can probably utilise a battery or electric power chord trimmer for the job, both of which are cheaper options.

Battery Electric Hedge Trimmer

Battery powered electric trimmers are much like cordless drills. They provide a very high quality operation but only for a limited time. The length of time the battery lasts after each charge depends on how hard you are working the tool, how much you are trimming off the hedges, and how thick the foliage that you are trimming is. If you only have a small amount to trim then a battery powered electric trimmer will probably do the job for you and they are generally the cheapest option. In fact most people I know who use an electric hedge trimmer own the battery powered version.

Electric Power Cord Hedge Trimmer

For gardeners with larger gardens to maintain it is probably worth spending a little bit more to buy an electric cord trimmer. Though being tied to a cord makes the tool less manoeuvrable, you don't have to worry about the tool running out of power with higher use.

Cost of an electric hedge trimmer

Obviously, being a powered tool, the costs are on the high end of garden tools. A cheap, battery operated hedge trimmer may be as cheap as \$100+. A middle-of- the-range hedge trimmer will be \$200-\$300 and top of the range hedge trimmers will set you back \$400+.

What to Wear When Gardening

What do you like to wear when you are out and about in the garden? What feels comfortable? Do you have designated attire or do you just wear whatever you are in? I myself think that what you wear in the garden is as important as the tools you choose to use. Choosing the right attire can make the difference between an efficient job and a prolonged effort.

This was proven to me once before. One day, I had no gardening work to do so I didn't take my tools with me when I went out and didn't take my usual gardening attire. During the day, a friend called with a bit of a predicament that required immediate attention and, as I had some time, I offered to get right on it. Now I can say that I well and truly got the job done but, had I been prepared, it would have been much easier.

Instead of wearing work boots, I had on a pair of casual shoes. Instead of wearing gloves, I had to go bare handed, and instead of good, solid garden clothing I had on a relatively good shirt and shorts.

Sometimes this would not be a problem but this job involved a lot of digging and it made a big difference. Because I had no gloves on, I ended up with a number of blisters. I spent a lot of time emptying my shoes of sand and the shoes themselves were not great when it came to putting pressure down on a shovel. As I said, I got the work done but it was not as easy as if I had the right attire.

So what attire should you use in the garden? The basics I would recommend are a good, quality pair of boots or at least an old pair of solid sports sneakers.

If you will be using tools in a repetitive motion, such as digging, gloves will minimise rubbing between your skin and the tool which will, in turn, minimise the risk of blisters.

I also recommend you wear some old clothes because they will very likely get dirty. Make sure the clothes you choose are comfortable and loose; not only will it make moving and bending easier, but also if you are working hard you will likely sweat and there isn't much worse than tight clothes sticking even closer to your skin.

A wide brimmed hat will not only protect you from getting a sunburn but can help take some of the force out of a hot sun bearing down on you which can cause discomfort without burning. Make sure you have water and sunscreen and use both liberally.

Choosing the right attire may very well be the difference between a one hour job and a two hour job, so choose wisely!

The Last Word of Buying Gardening Tools

Most people don't have the money to go out and buy an entire garden shed of tools, so acquire them over time. If the right tools are bought, it is very possible you won't need to buy the same tools again for years. Perhaps buy the tools you require as you need them or consider buying a few and temporarily hiring others. Just buy good quality tools; it will be well worth it.

Gardeners face many tough choices when it comes to gardening. What plants will work best? How big should the garden beds be? What garden features do you add? However the simple fact of the matter is that every garden decision apart from the most basic gardening revolves around using garden tools.

Making garden beds, laying pavers, planting and maintaining those plants all require you to have and efficiently use the right garden tools. It is for this very reason that buying the right gardening tools is so very important.

So You Want a Better Garden?

I have said it before and I will say it again, you will generally get what you pay for. Yes, it is possible to buy every budget tool out there and get a few seasons out of them. It is also possible that you may buy every budget tool twice in one season.

However, very few of the more expensive tools will require this. Many of the better brands and more expensive tools will even provide guarantees for multiple years.

Some have even been known to provide lifetime warranties because of the quality.

I have been guilty of buying budget tools and I have been disappointed. I have also seen enough people late in their lifetimes who still have tools that they bought when they were 20. This is something I very much intend to learn from. My best advice for buying gardening tools is that if you buy well the first time, you shouldn't need to revisit the shops again for quite some time.

Chapter 5

Common Gardening Tasks



Introduction to Common Gardening Tasks

When it comes to gardening, there are lots of different things that you will find yourself doing. Each season brings new tasks and some tasks need to be done in more than one season.

However, sometimes you can hear about a common garden task and realise you either haven't done it or, worse yet, don't even understand what it means.

Most people who are interested in growing a garden actually do want to enjoy the process of growing plants. Sometimes however, it can become overwhelming.



Hopefully once you have read this chapter and you understand the most common tasks you will also begin to realise that gardening is cyclical. If you do the right tasks at the right time, you will minimise the actual work you need to do.

Let me explain some of the more common gardening tasks you need to know and understand.

Part 1 - Pruning

Pruning is a very important task when it comes to gardening. Pruning helps by removing unnecessary parts of the plant that take a lot of energy to keep alive. Even when a flower dies, the plant can spend a lot of energy on the spent flowers starting to form seeds. Cutting or plucking off the dead flowers helps the plant by removing the need to give energy to that part of the growth, therefore helping to promote growth in the growing times. This is why dead heading, or removing the dead flowers, is a good practise as it encourages the plant to grow in other areas once it no longer has to focus on sustaining the dead flower and the seed production process.

Many long-term gardeners do not prune because they do not realise that plants like to be pruned. We almost think of plants as human where the loss of a limb causes distress, pain, and difficulty. Though it is true that you can prune many plants too much, in general pruning actually promotes health and growth within plants. So, remember, you are not hurting your plants when you give them a general prune.

Roses, in particular, enjoy a good winter prune. In July or August give your roses a healthy prune. Rose pruning advice varies greatly. I like to give them a fairly vigorous cut, removing between 1/3 and 2/3's of each stem. You can also thin out the rose by cutting off stems that cross each other, giving the rose a better overall shape. In fact, pruning time is a great opportunity to shape your plants in the way you'd like them to grow during the next growing season.

When pruning, always cut stems at a 45-degree angle. This helps the plant to repair itself where you make the cut and encourages more shoots to sprout around the cut area.

One thing to take into consideration when pruning is when you want plants to take a particular shape or where you want the main branch to grow in a particular direction. Where you cut, two or more shoots will likely grow. If you cut the main stem, it will shoot outwards as opposed to continuing to grow up and may require pruning later on to remove new stems that have grown in places you would prefer they did not grow.

Another important point is that some plants are more susceptible than others to a bad prune. As I mentioned before, I like to vigorously prune roses. This is mostly because established rose plants tend to be pretty hardy when it comes to vigorous prunes and can come back from seemingly impossible conditions.

Australian natives plants, on the other hand, often require a more delicate prune and certainly prefer to be pruned straight after a flowering season. A simple Google search will usually net you good results for whether or not the plant you wish to prune needs a delicate or vigorous pruning.

Part 2 - Weeding

One of the most common tasks that you will undertake as a gardener is weeding. There are a number of different things that you can do to minimise the amount of weeding that you need to do, but even then it will be a task that doesn't really go away.

One of the biggest questions you are probably asking is "what defines a weed compared to a plant?"

So You Want a Better Garden?

Dictionary.com defines weeds as follows:

*“a valueless plant growing wild, especially one that grows on cultivated ground to the exclusion or injury of the desired crop;
any undesirable or troublesome plant, especially one that grows profusely where it is not wanted: The vacant lot was covered with weeds.”*

These are true definitions, however I would also say this really depends on you. Yes, that is right, in many ways you get to decide what you think are weeds and what are not.

I say this because I have found many people who actually like some of the plants that most gardeners call weeds. An example is Dandelions, the little yellow flowering plants which shoot up in your gardens and grasses. Now, I absolutely hate these and definitely see them as weeds. Once they start growing in a garden, or grass, they take over. Many people **do** see them as weeds but if **you** like them in **your** garden, who's to say you can't grow them?

A few general characteristics of weeds are that they usually grow profusely and in large numbers. They often take over other plants which can cause those other plants to die. Most weeds are not particularly attractive, which is why they are seen as weeds. If they **were** attractive, people would probably want to grow them!

In time you will come to know what is a weed and what isn't as you learn and see what plants come back year after year. Weeds are very good at reproducing themselves. Also, if you are working in your own garden, don't be afraid of pulling out something that might not be a weed. If you don't want it there, then it is an unwanted plant which, some people would say, makes it like a weed.

What I will say about weeding is this: keep on top of it. In autumn and then spring, weeds will come up everywhere. You will soon pick them because they truly will just about take over your garden if you are not careful. Try and get them before they flower because this will minimise the amount that are able to come back next season. If they don't flower, they don't seed, and therefore don't reproduce.

Another tip to minimise the amount of weeds that you get is to make sure that you mulch your garden well, which I will cover next.

Part 3 - Mulching

A key component that many people forget about with gardening is mulching. This is especially important in Australia!

Mulch provides two main benefits:

1. Provides organic matter that breaks down to improve quality of the soil.
2. Provides soil cover, increasing the soils ability to hold water and limiting the ability for weeds to grow.



Mulch comes in very many forms. Most are organic though there is a growing trend in using inorganic materials such as shredded plastics. Like most elements to gardening, there will be different tips given for mulching.

So You Want a Better Garden?

The deeper the mulch the better, but a good depth to aim for is about 10cm. This will really inhibit the ability for weeds to grow and will trap in a lot of extra moisture.

When placing mulch around plants, it is important not to place it right up to the stem of the plant. Leave a 15-30cm barrier around each of the plants because as mulch breaks down it creates a lot of heat. If the mulch goes right up to the plant stem, the heat can actually cause the plant trauma, especially when it burns the plants roots. The other upside to leaving this space empty is that it creates a natural mound ensuring that when the plant is watered, the water will first sink into the soil around the plant and therefore not drain away from the plant.

During winter give your garden a really good mulching; your plants will need as much moisture as they can get in early spring as they begin to blossom. Make sure your garden maintains a healthy layer of mulch throughout summer to best utilise the minimal water available. A garden that is regularly mulched will stay healthier longer and the plants will be thankful for the regular breakdown of organic matter.

One kind of mulch to try and **stay away** from is pine chips created from used treated pine. If you are buying chips made from recycled pine make sure you ask the seller where the pine was sourced from. Most pine is treated so you need to be more vigilant if you want this kind of mulch.

Many places sell this kind of mulch cheap because it has very little benefit in any other form. The problem is that what the pine is treated with is toxic and can cause damage to plants. As the pine breaks down, the toxins seep into your garden and into your plants, which can cause great distress to even the most well-established shrubs and trees.

Many people ask the question “how much money should I spend on mulch?” Any mulch, as long as it isn't toxic, is better than no mulch but high grade quality mulch generally costs more because it is infused with better organic matter filled with more essential nutrients. Good mulch can sometimes be as effective as fertiliser.

Having said that, a budget mix from most specialist places is very effective and is what I generally use on gardens. I try and stay away from the super cheap mulches from local shops, but they are still better than having no mulch on your garden whatsoever.

Part 4 - Looking for Pests & Diseases

So, you've got the pH right, the soil structure right, the water absorption right. The shade and sun right. You have designed your garden and you've planted your shrubs and can't wait to see your amazing garden in full bloom. You sit back, relax, and wait. And wait. And wait. And everything looks good until suddenly one day, with seemingly no warning, everything seems to go bad.

This is a common scenario with beginner gardeners. The problem with pests and diseases is that they don't always cause a 'gradual' decline in plants. Bugs can find a home and diseases can take hold and the plant may show no sign for some time.

Therefore, it is important to regularly check your plants for pests and diseases. I'd suggest once a month that you take a quick look over your plants. Things like black dots or strangely curling leaves can point you to possible pests or diseases living in or around your garden.

More obvious is when you have pests like caterpillars eating the leaves. Caterpillars that get into a vegetable patch take very little time to devastate it, so you may like to check vegetables more regularly.

So You Want a Better Garden?

As far as learning about the various pests and diseases, I find there are too many possibilities to actually list here. However, when I find a bug and have not come across it before, I head on down to my local nursery and ask them for some advice.

If your leaves are looking funny, take pictures of the leaves with you so they can have a look. Bringing the leaf itself is not advisable because nurseries will not be pleased; in the case of a plant disease, it is best not to spread it.

Each time you encounter a new pest or disease, take note, because next time you'll know what the problem is straight away. In time, you'll be telling your friends and family what pests or diseases they are encountering!

This is an example of a brown thumb vs. a gardener. A gardener's garden will still get attacked by pests and encounter disease, but a gardener uses these opportunities to learn about those pests and diseases so next time they can nip them in the bud early. Brown thumbs see the pests and diseases and assume they have taken over their garden because they perceive themselves as hopeless at gardening.

Keep an eye out for pests and diseases, catch them early, and most importantly, when you come across a new pest, take note so next time you know what it is and can find out what to do about it.

Part 5 - Water Wise Gardening

With water being a very precious resource in Australia, people need to become increasingly aware of just how much water their garden is using and how much they need to survive. Australian dams are known to run very low more often than we would like. It is pivotal that people take water needs into account when planning and maintaining any garden.

Australian native plants are fantastic for water wise gardening. Being native, they are perfectly suited to the Australian climate.

Not all native plants are native to every part of Australia, with some plants being more suited to specific Australian climates. Take the Boronia, for example. Its best growing location is South Western Australia because it requires a little more water and a cooler climate than some other natives.

The Sturt Desert Pea however prefers more arid areas and, when cultivated carefully, can survive in very harsh conditions with very little water. This is why it is important, when considering planting native Australian plants, to discover which plants are from your particular area.

One myth that I want to bust right now is that Australian native plants don't need watering at all. This is not true, especially when they are first planted. Like any plant, Australian natives can take some time to become established. While it is true that, once established, they can take *far* less watering, however they still require water every few days. Australian natives, though, will generally survive periods without water better than European plants. When first planted, make sure Australian natives get plenty of water so as to establish them quickly.

Aside from having native plants, one of the best ways to have a water wise garden is to have a rainwater tank. Your tank can site above or below ground and collect rainwater from the gutters. Using rainwater on a mulched garden will give your plants the moisture they need to survive and grow without tapping into the much needed town water systems.

Finally, in most states in Australia, there are restrictions on when and how you can utilise reticulation systems. Make sure that you check with you local water authority on the current situation for your state. The fines for being caught are quite significant and there are very good reasons for limiting the use of water during peak usage times!

Part 6 - Fertilising

A very important part of gardening is to know what fertilisers to use on what plants and when to use them. Whether you are growing roses, vegetables or an organic garden, fertiliser will go a long way toward improving the health and well being of your gardens and lawns.

There are various kinds of fertiliser but three of the more common forms of fertiliser are as follows:

Organic fertiliser

Organic refers to substances that are generally created by living organisms and usually contain carbon molecules. They are often used to add nutrients to the soil to help a plant grow. Animal manure and compost formed by rotting plants are prime examples of organic substances which may be added to a garden to make it healthier.

Organic substances are not manufactured but are natural by-products of living, naturally occurring processes. Organic fertilisers are a mix of organic manures and naturally occurring mineral fertilisers. It uses these organic materials to naturally enrich the soil, filling it with more nutrients to give you improved flowering or fruit production.

Yates is my choice for fertilisers. They make a great Organic fertiliser called Dynamic Lifter. You can get Dynamic Lifter in many different types, depending what you are fertilising. Some examples are Dynamic Lifter for roses, for freshly laid turf, for established lawns, and for fruit and citrus trees.

These are designed to work best for each particular type of plant.

Slow release fertiliser

The benefit to using a slow release fertiliser is really explained by the name; these fertilisers slowly release nutrients into the soil over a longer period of time. This makes slow release fertiliser a great option for placing at the bottom of pots when putting new plants in. It also means you can scatter a bit around your garden and know it will be covered for whatever period of time the particular slow fertiliser you choose says.

Yates slow release fertiliser is called Anticote. Just like the organic fertilisers, Anticote comes in many different varieties, each aimed at benefiting a different plant. Some varieties are specialised for potted and container plants, for roses, for fruit trees and for natives. This Yates product is very, very good. Yates has produced a truly fantastic slow release fertiliser that I have regularly used, and have always achieved good results. That's not to say other brands can't produce similar results, this is just what I have found to be the best product for my garden.

Water Soluble Fertiliser

The benefit to water soluble, all-purpose fertilisers is that your average gardener doesn't always want to have to buy seven different fertilisers for seven kinds of plants, so the all-purpose fertiliser works well. Being water soluble is also a benefit because this helps the fertiliser sink further into the soil, right down to the root of the plant, enabling the plant to receive the nutrients that it needs more quickly.

Being all-purpose, it also makes the job of fertilising easier as well because you can just go around with one watering can and apply the fertiliser to your entire garden. This does need to be done more frequently than slow release, however.

Yates water soluble fertiliser is called Thrive and the name really does encapsulate what this fertiliser will do, it will make your garden thrive. Thrive also comes in many varieties but the best known and most widely used is their All-Purpose Thrive fertiliser.

Part 7 - Transplanting

Many beginner gardeners get quite scared at the prospect of trying to transplant a plant from one place to another. This does not have to be the case.

Transplanting is a pivotal skill in a gardeners arsenal and, when you go about it the right way, it does not have to be scary.

While it is true that there are some plants which don't cope well with transplanting, it is not, in my experience, true of most plants.

I work under the assumption that a plant is able to be transplanted and this has served me very well.

If you are looking to transplant and are really concerned about possible plant death, Google the plant species and you will quickly discover if it is a must not transplant variety.

As I said though, for 26 years I have worked under the assumption that something can be transplanted and I have experienced very few plant losses.

Having said all that, even if your plant is a candidate for transplanting and you do everything right, or in line with various hints and tips, plant death is a risk of transplanting.



I haven't experienced a lot of plant death from transplanting, but it still has happened and it has generally been when I least expected it.

Tips for a successful transplant process

A successful transplant is all about minimising the stress that your plant has to go through in the process. If you can make the transition as smooth as possible you will have more likelihood of experiencing a successful transplant.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Here are some tips to follow:

1. Prepare the soil that you are going to move the plant to first. Make sure it has plenty of organic matter and manures mixed throughout the soil. Try not to just dump the fertiliser or other organic matter on top, dig it and mix it in.
2. When you dig the hole, try and make it 10% bigger than what you will need. Though you will want to pack the new plant in tightly to provide it support, this also allows for some of the soil around the roots to be a bit more loose so it is easier for the roots to grow into.
3. Add some slow release fertiliser to the bottom of the hole so make sure there is ample nutrients supplied directly to the roots.
4. Apply a wetting agent to the soil before you plant. This will help to make sure the soil will have good drainage down to the roots once planted. If your plant cannot get enough water in the first few days after being moved, it will die.
5. Along with this, before you place the new plant in the hole, fill the hole with water. This will make sure there is water down near the roots right from the outset. Again, water is pivotal for the first few days.
6. **IF moving from a garden bed:** Make sure you get as much original soil as you can when you dig the plant out. You want to disturb the roots as little as you can. Try and take the entire root structure and 10% more soil where possible. Now, this is the best case, but not always possible. Sometimes you do have to cut a root stem to get it out, but try and make this minimal.

7. **IF moving from a pot:** If moving from a pot the principle is the same, but the way it is done looks different. If you are going from a pot it is quite likely that the roots will have filled up the pot space and there won't be excess soil to take. This is okay. Also, the roots will likely be very tightly packed and this needs to be fixed. When you get the plant out of the pot very gently try and pry some of the roots apart. Perhaps brush the bottom of the root structure with your hand to try and remove some of the soil so as to free up the roots. You don't want to disturb the roots too much but you do want to make them a little looser for best transplant chances. However, if to separate the roots would require breaking them, it would probably be best just to plant it as it is. Smaller roots breaking off isn't really a problem but if you are compromising the larger root systems it can cause severe stress to the plant.
8. Once you have the plant in the hole, make sure you pack the soil in tightly. You want to make sure the plant receives as much support as possible. Remember, the root structure is what usually provides support and when first transplanted the roots are not really locked into anything. You want to pack the soil firmly around your transplanted plant. It will settle even more in time, which is what you want.
9. Finally, give the plant a really good water. Even though you provided water at the bottom I would say you really can't over-water a transplanted plant.
10. Dealing with the stress of moving your plant will require a lot of water, so make sure you water it regularly, at least once a day, for the next one to two weeks. Some plants won't need this but it is best to be safe.
11. Expect to see some wilting and possible browning of leaves. The number one task for a plant when it is moved is to ensure its root structure is solid, so a plant will give less attention to its leaves during this process. This will often mean your plant won't look great for the first few days. Give it some time; it should start to perk up.

12. If after a week your plant still looks bad, it could mean it is struggling. All you can really do is make sure you keep the water up and possible add an application of a water-based fertiliser suitable for the plant to ensure your plant has the nutrients it needs.

The Last Word on Common Gardening Tasks

This section really is all about cultivating a gardening lifestyle. If you make gardening more than just a task on your to do list and it becomes something you enjoy doing and are passionate about, the monotony of these common tasks will diminish or even disappear. Gardening is all about seasons and each of these tasks fit within the seasons. As you make gardening a lifestyle, you will learn when the best time to do each of these is. Whether it be making sure your garden is well mulched before a hot summer or it be checking your plants for pests in autumn and spring (and summer and winter sometimes!), it all fits within a natural flow which will become apparent when you adopt a gardening lifestyle.

Chapter 6

Choosing the Right Plants



Introduction to Choosing the Right Plants

At the end of the day a garden isn't really a garden without some plants. Gardeners are usually passionate about gardening because they love plants.

You are most likely reading this book because you want to be able to grow a vast array of plant species for yourself. As such, this is perhaps the most important chapter in this book to you, choosing the right plants for your situation and environment.



Part 1 - Choosing annual plants

Before I cover how to choose annual plants for your garden, I should probably explain what *annual* means. The word annual is normally used in the context of saying a particular plant is an *annual*. This basically means that the plant in question takes one full growing season, or one year, to go through all the life stages of plants from seed germination to death.

A plant that is considered an annual does not generally live longer than one year, though the best annuals are ones that self-reproduce and provide a brand new batch of annuals the following season.

Some examples of common annuals in Australia (particularly in cold and temperate regions) are Petunias, Marigolds and Snap Dragons.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Generally, a lot of annuals should be planted toward the end of winter or at the absolute latest, early spring so they are ready for full bloom in spring and summer. The right annuals at this time will really make your garden pop. I love walking around my local area in spring and seeing all the colours that people have added to their garden by choosing a great array of annual plants. Sadly, by the end of summer, most annuals are either dead or very much on the way out.

Sadly, a lot of cultivated annuals are not very good at actually reproducing and so I always try and choose annuals that will provide a new crop year after year so I don't continually have to buy more. Snap Dragons are one of my favourite examples of this. Having said that, some people have favourite annuals that they are happy to plant each year.

How do you know which ones fit this bill? Trial and error. I deliberately do not provide a list here because some of the best learning regarding annuals actually comes from experience. It is my aim to educate you on how to learn gardening skills and this doesn't come in one season. In the long run you are better off getting out there and giving it a go rather than just getting the answers to everything first.

You might be asking why you would plant something that will only last for one year. Well, here are a few reasons to consider annuals:

1. Annuals often flower very profusely because they have a limited time to reproduce. This encourages them to produce as many flowers as they can in a short period of time.
2. Annuals are really good space-fillers. When you plant perennials, you have to plant them apart to give them room to grow. However, in the first few seasons this can leave lots of gaps in your garden. Planting a few annuals in these gaps will bring colour to what otherwise would be an empty spot.

3. Annuals work really well in small spaces and also as borders around plants and garden beds. A lot of people fill their main garden area with lots of big, bushy perennials, and then, each year, place annuals around the outside to create a really bright, colourful border. As annuals are often lower growing plants and don't fill out as much as perennials, they can fill the little spaces really well.

What to look for when choosing annual plants for your garden

What to look for when choosing annuals really is up to you. One of the big benefits to annuals is that they are annual. They provide you with the opportunity for change each year, if you wish. When you choose perennials, you are choosing plants for the long term, so you need to be really careful with your choice. If you choose an annual you end up disliking, it only lasts for one flowering season!

In terms of what to plant with annuals, your local nursery will have a large stock of good annuals for your area, generally all year round. Choosing annuals is less about researching the right plant for your spot because, like I said, you are not choosing a plant for the long term. The easiest way is to simply make a trip to your nursery and see what is in stock.

Experiment, try something new each season and enjoy the temporary nature of annuals. Most annuals require full sun and good drainage, so as long as you have prepared your soil well you should have relatively easy success with most annuals.

The biggest planting phase is mid to late winter or at the latest, early spring for temperate and cold zones, and generally anytime from the start of winter in the tropical areas. The difference is due to annuals requiring a warmer soil. Cold and temperate zones in Australia generally have colder winters and also more chance of frosts, which devastates annuals.

Some tropical gardeners I have heard even plant in autumn to allow for some winter colour, such is the benefit of living in a tropical area for growing annuals. However, in general, annuals are all about spring!

The only thing to make sure you understand when considering planting annuals, is that it will increase the amount of time you have to spend in your garden each year.

Planting perennials can be the best option if you just want to get something growing and then have to do very little afterwards, besides a little maintenance.



However if you are getting into gardening because you really enjoy spending time in the garden and want this to be a part of your lifestyle, annuals can be a fantastic addition to your gardening space.

Part 2 - Choosing Perennial Plants

Perennial plants have a life cycle that is longer than two years and there are more perennial plants than there are annual plants. Exactly when a perennial plant reproduces differs greatly depending on the species. The main characteristic is they do not grow and die in one or two seasons, but continue to live on for multiple growing seasons. This means, when choosing a perennials plant, you are planting for the long term and need to make sure you are happy with your choices.

What to look for when choosing perennials

1. Choose plants that suit your climate! You may have a favourite plant from a previous place or you might find something in a magazine that looks great, but if it doesn't suit your climate then it is a bad choice.
2. Does it suit the location you want to plant it in? If you want to grow ferns that are good in a temperate zone, you still probably don't want to plant them in the hottest place in your garden. Ferns are usually found in tropical areas that have a canopy and do not cope well with full sun. Know what the garden bed you are planting in is like. Does it receive full sun? Does your house provide it with morning or afternoon shade? Does it receive strong winds? When buying plants, check on the tag to see what conditions it needs to thrive.
3. Consider your range of colours. You might find two plants with really beautiful colour flowers, but next to each other those colours clash. You may try and have a few colours in each garden. A garden bed full of red flowers may look okay, but a garden bed with a mix of colours will generally look better.
4. Consider the flowering seasons. Most people want a garden that flowers year round, so try and choose some plants which flower in different seasons. If you have something that flowers from spring to summer, compliment it with something that either flowers in autumn and winter or, perhaps shares one season in common.

5. Consider how the plant grows. If you have a defined space and you choose two plants to grow in it, one fast-growing and one slow-growing, this could be a problem. The fast-growing one will start to fill the space really quickly, possibly choking out the slower-growing plant. You can prune the faster-growing plant, but as it grows fast, this may require regular pruning, which means more work for you. You can still use these plants, but perhaps plant the slow-growing one first, give it a season to get established and fill out some of the space and then plant the faster-growing variety.

I am deliberately not recommending any specific plants here. There are such a wide variety of considerations throughout Australia; your local nurseries are the best places to find out local knowledge. Your local nursery is a treasure trove of experience and local knowledge so, especially if you are new to gardening, I would strongly advise you to stop in and talk with them. Having said all this, later on in this chapter you will read a recommendation from me and that is to strongly consider choosing Australian native plants.

What about plants that last for 2 years, what are they called?

There is a third variety of plant, besides annual and perennial plants, and these are called biennial plants. 'Bi' means two in Latin, so a biennial plant is a plant that takes two growing seasons, or two years, to go through its life cycle. In most cases, this means the plant will grow its leaves in the first season and then its flowers and seeds in the second season, before dying at the end of its second season. Once again, hopefully a biennial would be replaced the following year by a new batch of seedlings. Apart from this difference, bi-ennials are much the same in every other way to annual plants.

Part 3 - Seeds vs. Seedlings

The next big question is whether to plant from seeds or seedlings. This often depends on the grower his or herself and can even depend on what you are planting. I personally prefer to grow from seedlings for most plants but that has more to do with my lack of patience than anything! So what I will do now is give some pro's and con's to each method.

Seeds

Pro's

- You can have complete control over what goes into the plant. This is particularly important if you are growing vegetables and want an entirely organic veggie garden. If this is the case, then growing from seeds is a must.
- Can get many plants from one packet.



- May be able to obtain the seeds from friend's plants or other plants you have access to.- Small cost output can equal big return.

Con's

- No idea how many plants you will get.
- Many seedlings may sprout close together requiring transplanting.

So You Want a Better Garden?

- Many shop variety seeds do not grow very well, if at all, due to the growth process and chemical treatment they receive.
- Longer time for plant to grow to the size you are after.
- Some plants are just too hard to grow from seed and knowing what these plants are can be difficult.

Seedlings

Pro's

- Complete control over where the seedlings grow and how close together they are.
- Shorter time between planting and maturity.
- Can do everything at once, planting, pest control, soil prep, staking, etc. 109



Con's

- More Costly.
- Don't know what has gone into growing the seedling to that point
- More chance of less plants if seedlings die.

Seedlings are usually the easier option, but you could argue that what you get from the extra time spent with seeds is worth it. What may be a happy medium is to grow seedlings from seeds in some seedling trays, then plant your own seedlings into your vegetable garden plot.

This, again, is a little more time-consuming, but it can mean that you get more of the pro's and less of the con's. It is also a good way to keep your veggie crop continually growing as you can harvest some seeds from your first batch of plants (from veggies that produce them in easily harvested form) and get some seedlings growing while your mature plants produce their crop. Some plants, though, are very difficult to grow from seeds yourself or hard to actually acquire seeds for.

Ultimately whether you go with seeds or seedlings depends on what plant you are hoping to grow, and that only comes from experience or asking people for specific advice.

The Third Option

There is another option and it comes into play mostly when choosing perennials. This third option is to plant relatively mature plants. Most nurseries stock a wider range of mature perennials than anything else. Though you often can get seeds and even seedlings for most perennial plants, mature plants are probably the way to go for beginner gardeners. They have usually been growing for a couple of seasons, are much stronger than seeds or seedlings would be at first, and will often already be able to flower or will soon be ready to flower.

I still often choose to grow from seedlings with my perennial plants because I enjoy the challenge, but if you want to get your garden bed up to scratch more quickly, and increase the chance of your perennials surviving, there is nothing better than planting mature plants.

This also is an option if you have a friend looking to get rid of some plants as you could try transplanting them. Transplanted perennials, when successful, are a great way to skip a lot of the early development work if you just want to get the plant going. Sometimes, transplanted plants can take longer to flower because they have to deal with the move. However, transplanted plants are really just bigger, mature plants than what you would buy in a nursery.

Part 4 - Three Reasons to Go Native

I fell in love with Australian native plants around 2007. Their colour and beauty dazzled me as I regularly drove from the city, into the country where I grew up. I don't know how I missed them growing up, but I did.

Since then, I have spent time getting better acquainted with many of our local Australian species of plants. I'm convinced if we are going to live more sustainably, which I also believe we must, Australian natives will need to claim a place in the heart of all Australians. Here are two key reasons why I would recommend you to strongly consider using Australian native plants in your garden.

Reason 1 for going with native plants

It is well known that Australian natives are very water efficient. This isn't to say that they don't need water, all plants need water! They are, however, used to the little water that often falls in many parts of Australia. As time goes by, water restrictions are becoming more and more of an issue for gardeners.

Australian native plants, once established, can thrive with these restrictions. The best way to get success with your native plants is to choose plants endemic to your area. This means choosing plants that are found naturally occurring in your region.

Reason 2 for going with native plants

Australian plants are also very unique. So many of their flowers are very much unlike anything else in the world or, at the very least, the combinations of foliage and flowers are. There is a special beauty, in my opinion, coming from this unique mixture of characteristics, which, when planted together, provide a really beautiful contrast in your garden. I think that, over time, you will come to love them, too.

Reason 3 for going with native plants

Native plants are used to the local fauna. Fauna is another name for animals and insects. What can sometimes happen is a particular native plant will grow really well in one particular place. Someone who lives in a very similar climate may decide they will also grow that plant but then has trouble doing this. They try and change the soil, they try and fix the plant's situation, but what they may not have necessarily accounted for is the fact every area will have different native fauna.

So, one plant might grow really well in the tropics of Queensland, but really struggle in the tropical north of WA, because there are different animals or insects interacting with the plant.

Planting Australian Natives that are Endemic to Your Area

There are many varieties of native plants which will do absolutely fine in many different areas and climates of Australia. Yes, some varieties can be trained or modified to survive in more harsh climates than they may naturally occur in, however, it still stands that the best plants for your garden are actually those which are endemic, or indigenous to your area.

Other Plant Varieties

There exists in nature a very delicate balance within local ecosystems. What can sometimes happen is that you add a plant to your garden and it grows well. You rejoice. What you miss is the seeds that get blown off and start growing down the road in your local bushland. What may then happen is this new plant variety strangles out an existing variety, causing it to either struggle to co-exist or disappear completely. Therefore, I do strongly recommend you try and source a local variety of a native before you go adding a foreign native from outside your local area. Many local councils provide lists of plants that are native to your area.

Part 5 - Building a Flowering Backbone Using Australian Native Plants

Having a garden that is full of flowers all year round is generally a goal of most gardeners. People like to look out into their yards and see the beauty that comes from a nice garden with various shapes and colours during every season of the year.

This is a worthy aim, however many people do not really know how to go about achieving this goal. When planning a garden, it is important to think about the many seasons it will go through and choose your plants accordingly.

This goal is very achievable if you choose the right plants to act as a sort of backbone to your garden. There are four Australian Native plants in particular which I recommend for use to design and build an ever-flowering garden.

So You Want a Better Garden?

What are these four plants? They are Callistemon (Bottle Brush), Grevillea, Banksia and Wattle plants. These four Australian Native Plants are available in every shape and size you could desire. You can get them as ground covers, as small shrubs, as hedge sized shrubs, and as taller growing trees. They are also all birdattracting and very, very hardy. There is not a climate in Australia where a variety of these four plants will not grow.

Another upside to these plants is that, though they are different, there is a similarity to many of their flowers which carries across a garden. A well placed Wattle in one area would capture the attention of a passer by, all the while linking to a Grevillea in another area of the garden. The flowers of a Banksia are often very similar to the flowers of a Callistemon, once again creating a sort of natural transition for the gardener between garden beds.

As mentioned earlier, each of these Australian Native plants is bird-attracting. Not only are they bird-attracting but they are life-attracting in general. Gardens require insects to come and live in their space to help keep them healthy. They require insects to pass their pollen around and also to help in the development of their seeds. These four plants almost guarantee that you will have a thriving, diverse range of life in and around your garden.

These plants often require very similar conditions which means they can mix and match well. A Grevillea ground cover will go well growing around a feature Banksia. A small hedge of dwarf Callistemon around a Wattle tree can look very nice. Even using each of these plants as a feature plant and then using all manner of other Australian Native plant varieties around them will help develop a thriving native garden. These four varieties of native plants really can help you set up a fantastic, all-seasons garden.

The Last Word on Choosing the Right Plants

If there is anything that gets the blood flowing in gardeners, it is choosing plants. At the end of the day, gardening is all about growing plants, so getting to choose what you grow is a very fun aspect. Making the right choice is very important but, at the same time, any mistakes you make can generally be rectified, so don't be so concerned about the choice that you never actually get to choosing!

When I am choosing plants, I tend to think of the next five years. Yes, many plants you choose will last longer, such as trees to offer shade, but the reason I think of only the next five years is because I often like to change things up every now and then. Also, making choices for five years means I feel less pressure to get it right. If I choose something, after five years I will know whether I am happy with it or not.

Now, if I am happy, most perennials will go past five years, but if I am not happy, I feel the freedom to replace them because I gave myself a designated period of time. I use this strategy as a way of removing some of the worry that can be associated with choosing plants. Good luck with your future plant choices!

Chapter 7

Month-by-Month Gardening Tips



Introduction to Month-by-Month Gardening Tips

What do you need to do this month to keep your garden looking healthy? How can you be proactive now so that you get the best results next month or even next year? What does a yearly gardening lifestyle actually look like? These are the questions that I will answer in this chapter.

Knowing what to do each month will go a long way towards minimising the amount of time that you need to spend in the garden or, if you enjoy spending time in your garden, will open up more free time to choose what you do as opposed to being forced to do gardening tasks by necessity. If you can follow the seasons and understand the climate you live in, doing a few bits and pieces each month will help you maintain your garden in a neat and efficient way.



Exactly what your garden needs in any given month does depend on whether you live in a cold, temperate, or tropical climate. However, what you must do in a cold climate can also often be beneficial in a tropical one. As such the advice I give will be general, but I will occasionally point out climate-specific advice.

January Gardening Tips

In Australia, January is a very important month in the gardening cycle. In tropical and sub-tropical climates, the weather is generally hot and wet. In cold and temperate climates it is generally hot and mostly dry, sometimes very dry. The key word here for all climates is 'hot' and this has a large bearing on any garden requirements this month.

January is a good month to take cuttings from your favourite shrubs in cold climates. As long as you have kept the watering up, and therefore kept your shrubs healthy, cuttings should take well in January with the sun and heat.

Cuttings require a bit of attention, and a lot of water, to make sure they survive.



In temperate climates, perhaps hold off for another month or so, until March or April, because cuttings may wilt if faced with really hot weather right from the beginning. I haven't covered how to take cuttings in this e-book but you can find out how to do it quite easily with a little research.

January is also a big month for fruit pests. Check your fruit trees for the various pests that are common to each individual fruit tree type and, if needed, treat them. Your local nursery is a good source for advice on how to treat particular fruit trees. This is particularly relevant if you live in tropical or sub-tropical climates because January really is fruiting month.

Another good tip for January is to prune your most vigorous growing plants just slightly. In particular your roses could do with a mild prune as this will encourage new growth and lead to a great display of flowers come autumn. Just wait until they stop flowering and cut the tips off, particularly any dead heads (dead flowers). Be careful not to make this prune too drastic, it is simply to encourage new growth. Bougainvilleas may also be trying to take over your garden so prune them back to keep them under control.

There is also still time to plant annuals like vincas, petunias, and sunflowers that can handle full sun so you keep your garden looking great right into autumn. Make sure you water them well and plant them with either a good liquid fertiliser or a good slow-release fertiliser. In fact, you could give a light sprinkling of either a liquid or slow release fertiliser throughout your garden to keep the nutrients up.

February Gardening Tips

There is basically one word which sums up the key focus for gardening in February:

water.

In cold and temperate regions this is because you likely haven't had enough of it. In sub-tropical and tropical regions you have possibly had a lot or even too much of it.



Water is particularly important in cold and temperate climates in February. After a long, dry summer, or even patches of hot summer in these regions, plants that have lacked a good water supply are more susceptible to disease and worse, death. In tropical climates, water is often not the issue but water getting down into the soil may still be problematic.

So You Want a Better Garden?

February can be a good time for the application of a good soil wetting agent. If you are not a fan of soil wetting agents, use a pitchfork to aerate the soil. This is something that would be useful across the board and will be necessary for large, grassed areas. The hot summer sun bakes the soil, causing it to form a crust which reduces the ability for water to sink in. If you are watering your plants and just watching the water run away and not penetrate, you need to either aerate the soil or apply a soil wetting agent. Soil wetting agents are available from most garden nurseries and many hardware stores which stock garden accessories.

In February keep regularly dead-heading flowers such as roses and dahlias. If you encourage your plants to continue to bud through February, they will flower for longer, whereas if they are able to go to seed, there is less chance of solid flowering into the autumn months.

February is a month where plants can really start to suffer from disease. Even if plants have been well watered, and the water is getting into the soil, bugs are very active during summer and February can easily become a month where they take over. Check over your plants and make sure that, if you find leaves or flowers with disease on them, clip them off and throw them out. Don't compost these because the problem can spread to your soil through the compost. Check out your local nursery and see what plants they sell a good powder protection for. Roses are one plant that could do with a light rose powder covering to help them fight against aphids and cover tomatoes with tomato dust to ward off caterpillars.

An organic way to tackle aphids is to make a soapy mixture. Try mixing 1 cup vegetable or white mineral oil, 2 cups water and 2 teaspoons of soap shavings (without bleach). Mix this together so the soap shavings mix and then spray this over the affected leaves every few days until they disappear.

Hopefully your summer vegetables are still growing strong but if they are looking a bit on the bad side you might like to consider starting to get your garden beds ready for the autumn vegetable crop. Remove dead veggies and compost them. Start cleaning up the garden beds, making sure they are well formed and, if they are reticulated, check to see if the reticulation is still in fully functional order. More will be done here in March, these are just some early steps if your summer vegetables are finished.

March Gardening Tips

Though the weather can still be very warm, March is the month where the temperature generally does start to cool down, especially overnight. This makes the garden a cooler place to be in the morning which makes many gardeners much happier people to be around. Just as you needed to in February, keep an eye out throughout March for bugs trying to take over your plants that have fought hard to survive all summer. Treat quickly when found.

With March also marking the beginning of autumn, it is a good time to start thinking about what you want in your garden in spring and what needs to happen for that over the next few months.. Yes, winter comes and goes first, but an ideal spring showing requires forethought. From about mid-March to May you'll want to get any winter/spring flowering bulbs in the ground, so perhaps start preparing your bulb garden beds now so that they are ready to go when the time is right.

March is a good month to check your how the mulch is going in your garden. Over the summer your mulch will break down and so you may need to top it up during either March or April. You should only need a top up now given that most of the hot weather is behind you and you'll want good drainage in winter.

The upside to laying a good layer of mulch now is that it will minimise how much you need to add when it comes time for the following spring and summer.

Late March is a really good time to try your hand at growing your own garlic. Winter lettuces will also thrive throughout autumn and winter. Planting some spring onions now would also be a good idea. A trick with spring onions; if your supermarket sells them with the roots still attached you can just buy those, plant them and you'll have immediately mature spring onion plants. March is also a good month for sowing carrots, spinach, broad beans, and peas.



If you have perennials that have taken over your garden in spots over the summer, and are coming to the end of their flowering season, give them a good trim. Some perennials do this better than others, the best way I've found to learn is by trial and error so give it a go. Just remember, try and leave one section of the plant as undisturbed as you can while removing and transplanting the other section. This tends to help both plants survive the separation process. However, not all plants should be pruned yet. Some people make the mistake of pruning their roses too early. Autumn is still too early for roses because, if you prune them now, they'll start growing back too soon and won't perform as well. Save your roses for June/August pruning. Continuing to dead-head roses is still important, though.

April Gardening Tips

By April the summer heat should be over and it is time to prepare for winter. In the tropics this means cooler and drier weather. In cooler and temperate climates this hopefully means a lot of rain is on its way.

It can actually be around now that gardeners make the biggest mistakes because you start to think 'well we've survived summer, now we'll just sit back, relax, and let winter take care of our garden by itself'. Wrong! What you do now over the next month or two will directly affect how well your garden survives the next summer!

Autumn is a fantastic time to be out and about in your garden. Usually, in most parts of Australia, the weather starts to become milder but there still remain a significant number of sunny days.

April is also a great month for planting spring bulbs, such as daffodils. This will give them plenty of time to get set and grow, ready for a beautiful showing come September. It can also be a good time to spread a light organic fertiliser around your shrubs and trees. Though they'll receive winter rains in cold and temperate zones, and won't be growing as much, they still require nutrients to survive the cooler winter.

Autumn, and in particular April, can be a great time for planting trees because trees really do require good amounts of water to take root.

So You Want a Better Garden?

In tropical zones your gardens should be filled with moisture and cold/temperate gardens will soon receive the rain needed. Planting now will give them a month or two of good, sunny weather while still receiving some good rain, and then lapping up the rain from winter.

The milder weather will also help because the trees won't experience sun damage as easily before they have the root system to cope with it.

From a vegetable growing perspective, vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and your leafy Asian-style veggies really need to go in now if you want to get the best out of them throughout winter.

Use the next few months to really sow into your garden.



As the rain starts to fall in cooler and temperate climates you won't have to spend as much time worrying about, and making sure, your garden has water, so really work on other tasks, such as preparing garden beds for spring and summer annuals, fertilising, and the like. Take the sunny days provided to you to do the most you can for your garden so that when spring and summer comes again your job will be easier!

May Gardening Tips

May is the last month of autumn, your last month of gardening before winter really starts to hit. If you have a lot of delicate plants in pots out enjoying the summer and autumn sun, now is the time to find a more sheltered spot for winter. Many pot plants are fine outside during winter, but make sure your pots have good drainage, you don't want the roots to be soaking in water 24/7 as this can cause the roots to rot. Potted plants do need a good amount of water, which self-watering pots do well, but they also need to have good drainage.



Make use of the fallen autumn leaves around your garden. Pile them up together in a compost bin or a corner of your garden so that they can break down and then be used as mulch or compost later in the year. Some of the best gardeners I know spend very little on mulch and compost because they use the natural seasons their gardens go through, and the waste produced (such as leaves), to produce good, rich mulch and composts themselves. Organic matter makes a really big difference towards growing a healthy garden so why waste the nutrients and organic matter from dropped leaves? Obviously in Australia we don't experience the same level of leaf dropping as places like the United States since we have far fewer deciduous plants, however there is often still a lot of leaf litter around to make use of.

May is also your last chance to get spring bulbs in. Try and get them sown within the first two weeks of May for best results this spring if you have not put them in during April. Early May is also a great chance to plant vegetables so that you get a bumper winter crop of vegetables throughout the winter months. If you leave planting till June, you won't start to see the produce until July or even August, depending on what you are planting. Plant some broccoli, carrot, spring onions, or winter lettuces.

If you want to plant some citrus trees, you are not too late. Citrus trees, and trees in general, really like to be planted in Autumn because it means they usually receive a good mix of sun and rain so that they can really develop their root systems, then get the rains of winter before they have to cope with the hot sun of spring and summer.

June Gardening Tips

June marks the start of winter for most Australians. For some people this is cause for celebration. For others it is cause for commiseration. For your garden it is just another season which will either see it go from strength to strength or see it fall over, depending on how well you care for it.

There are many plants which slow down their growth substantially throughout winter and so June is a good time to start giving them a trim. Roses can be pruned from June through till August. Other flowers like hydrangeas would benefit greatly from trimming off the old flowers and growth to allow it to jump into spring with a burst of energy and healthy new shoots. Remember, pruning promotes growth.

So You Want a Better Garden?

If you have decided that you actually want to plant a new rose garden, then June is the month for you. By planting new roses now, you give them a good chance to get established throughout winter and ready for solid growth and flowering in the spring. Pick a mix of colours and aromatic roses and place them in a well prepared garden bed. Feed them a good rose fertiliser such as Yates Acticote slow-release for roses. Also make sure you mulch them well. Don't mulch too close to the stem, leave about a 15-30 cm gap all the way around. This will help keep moisture close to the young plants, but will also help to fight off frost in cold areas.

Make sure you keep your winter vegetables well fertilised. Thrive All-Purpose fertiliser is as good as any for this purpose, in my opinion. Follow the directions on the label for application. Generally it is best to apply fertiliser to your winter vegetables every two weeks. This will help your veggies to grow quickly and give you a solid yield.

Also during winter, it is very important that you get on top of your garden weed situation. If you don't get on top of weeds in winter, they will spread because the extra water available will allow them to really thrive. This can cause them to move into new areas of your garden that may have previously been free from the serial pests.



June is another good month to split up shrubs like daisies and lavender and plant them in other parts of your garden. Make sure you choose big sections to transplant. The extra water (in cold and temperate climates) will help the plant to establish well, but the lack of sun can still be an issue. Also make sure that you cut off any flowers, both alive and dead, to ensure that all of the plants energy can be directed toward growing new roots.

July Gardening Tips

One of the most important tasks to do during the month of July, if you are a rose grower, is to give your roses a strong prune if you have not already. There are varying suggestions when it comes to pruning roses. Some say to remove approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the plant, some suggest removing up to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the plant.



I myself lean towards the $\frac{2}{3}$ suggestion simply because I have found that the harder you prune the rose, the better they seem to grow back and, also, the more control you have over the size and shape of new growth.

Roses are very hardy plants, regardless of what you may hear. As long as they have sufficient water (the main cause of rose death) they can survive some very harsh conditions. Try and prune in the middle of the day. This gives the plant time to adjust to its new 'hair cut' before dealing with the cool of night, so they don't get a cold fright. Also, when you are trimming a stem, try and make the cut at a 45-degree angle. Your roses will heal better and have more ability to fight off disease if you do this.

Another issue that you may face in the winter is frost, especially if your go through a cold, dry spell in your area. When overnight temperatures drop down to close to 0°C , your plants may experience frost. To help limit frost damage, the best tip I can give you is to make sure that your garden beds are sufficiently mulched. This works because it keeps more heat in the soil, which enables your plants to better regulate their own heat. They may still suffer from frost, but if they have access to heat from the soil, the plant cells themselves should not freeze and therefore your plants will be better off.

Other than this, just try and keep on top of the weeds that are bound to be growing in your gardens and lawns. If you don't like the weeds, then you need to get rid of them. One way to do this is to use a hand trowel to carefully dig them out, making sure you get the root as well as the top leaves. Another way is if you have a weeding tool. A weeding tool has two prongs at the end. You can place the prongs into the soil around the roots and then lever the weed out. Try and get rid of flowering weeds in your lawn as soon as possible so as to limit the spread of the weeds as spring and summer draw near.

August Gardening Tips

From late July to August your plants and particular your roses will start to grow vigorously again, ready to absolutely take off once the weather starts to warm up so any late pruning must be done by early August.

There are two other key tasks to complete during August. One is to make sure that you apply a good fertiliser, preferably a slow release fertiliser, to all of your plants and to also make sure you apply a good lawn fertiliser over all your grassed areas. You want all of your garden to be able to take advantage of any late August rains and then the warmer weather which comes around mid-September.



So You Want a Better Garden?

Another task is to ensure that all your garden beds have a healthy layer of mulch. Though winter is usually quite dry in most parts of Australia, you still want to lock in as much of the moisture that has fallen as possible. Once again, the weather does generally warm up in September which means more moisture will evaporate. The evaporation can be limited by a good 10 cm thick layer of mulch.

At this time of year your winter vegetables will be coming to an end. August is a good month for you to start to decide what vegetables you are going to want to grow in Spring. Some good vegetables to consider for spring are carrots, lettuce, leeks, onions, spring onions, peas, Asian vegetables, and beans. You may also like to grow some of your own strawberries.

If you are someone who likes to try their hand at growing your own vegetable seedlings, then you could buy some seedling trays, fill them with a good combination of potting mix and vegetable soil mix, and sow some of the above mentioned vegetables, as seeds, into these trays. Preferably keep these inside because a warmer environment will help with germination. You might also like to sow some tomato seeds for mid to late spring.

August is also the time to start thinking about what annuals you want to have and to start planting them. Plants like petunias, marigolds, vincas, and the like are good choices. Most nursery's will be stocking themselves to the hilt with a wide range of annuals for this spring season, so why not head on down to your local nursery and check out what stock they have in store for you to consider this spring!

September Gardening Tips

What makes September such a good month for gardens is the fact that, in general around Australia, the weather starts to warm up with more sunshine hours, and this leads to a slightly warmer soil temperature. However there are still generally occasional showers (and even some storms) which supply much needed moisture so that your plants can make the most of the sunny weather. This is slightly different in tropical regions where the rains will actually be starting in the next month or so after the dry season. So what do you need to do this month? Well, in my opinion there are two things you must do during spring, and therefore starting this month; enjoy the fruit of your labour and start to prepare for summer.

September is a good month to plant some annuals. Some Australian favourites include ones such as petunias and marigolds, as listed previously. Though these are not Australian natives, they can be planted in and around your native plants to spice up your garden with a little colour.



Local nurseries will have a large array of annuals to choose from so why not head down and pick some out.

Make sure you spend some time out and about your garden, soaking in the sun and enjoying the spring blossoms. Perhaps even look for a local wildflower show to go to one weekend.

So You Want a Better Garden?

As your plants blossom, make sure you trim off the flowers when they die. This encourages your plants to flower again because they really want to produce seeds. September, and spring in general, are also great times for growing your own veggies. Plant some peas, lettuce, beetroot, carrots and silver beet and if you have not already, it's not too late to plant tomatoes or beans.

The second major task for spring is to make sure that you start to prepare your garden and grassed areas to cope with the summer heat. If you have any dead patches of lawn, dig up a couple of runners from other spots in your grass to replace them with. This is mostly effective with buffalo-style grasses though couch grasses will respond as long as you get some roots. I like to find runners that have grown in places where they were not meant to for use. Anyone who has grass knows that keeping it separate from your garden can be a big task by itself! If you take these troublesome shoots and plant them in dead spots you effectively 'kill two birds with one stone.'

Make sure that your garden beds are sufficiently mulched now. Don't wait for summer because the weeds will pop up in abundance from late winter if you do not have sufficient mulch. Plus, if you mulch well now, your soil will be improved so that is it better prepared to handle the heat of summer, and, in the case of tropical Australia, the wet of summer.

October Gardening Tips

October is all about getting the most out of your garden in a season where growth is the norm. Hopefully your spring flowers are well into their blooming phase now and will therefore be requiring some food.

Another great idea for the month of October is to plant some new plants. With the weather generally warming up around Australia, the soil temperatures will have increased and the night time temperatures generally are not getting as low. This makes October an opportune month to put some more plants in to take advantage of the many months of great weather ahead.

Make sure you check your young vegetable seedlings for pests; snails in particular. I have found snails to be very active in October. If you are finding snails to be a hassle, either try using snail baits or, if you want to grow an organic vegetable garden, try companion planting which means finding plants you can place together where something about the one plant will stop bugs attacking the other.



An example of this is planting marigolds around your vegetables to limit caterpillars. The scent of marigold flowers put off caterpillars, so they leave your vegetables that are close by alone. There are a plethora of resources on companion planting online and most nurseries can help you learn what goes best with what. Another organic approach is a trap. Bury a small tin or container at ground level, leaving the top open. Fill the trap $\frac{3}{4}$ full with beer. The snails will be attracted to the beer and will fall in and drown.

If you have lots of potted plants, especially ones that have been indoors during winter, you may like to seriously consider re-potting them. They will be trying to grow just like all the other plant in your garden. If they have been sitting in the same pot for over a year, there is a strong chance that their roots will have grown as much as is possible. Pull them out, untangle the roots very gently (you don't really want to break any of the roots off) and place them in slightly different, preferably bigger, pots. Basically, the bigger the pot, the bigger the plant can grow, at least until it reaches the normal size range for that plant. Include some slow release fertiliser and fresh, good potting mix to improve the health of your repotted favourite.

Finally, make sure that you stay on top of weeds, especially those that might be trying to pop up in your grass. Hopefully you have followed my advice and mulched your garden, so weeding should be easier. Don't let any weeds that have made it through your mulch take hold, they'll be harder to remove.

November Gardening Tips

If you live in a tropical climate, you may have already started to receive the summer rains and this will only continue. If you have large grassed areas, make sure you either manually aerate them with a garden fork, or apply a good soil wetting agent during November.

Even your gardens could do with a bit of soil wetting agent to make sure they can absorb and dissipate the large quantities of water about to come their way. You'll also want to apply a good lawn fertiliser and a good garden fertiliser to the various areas of your garden.

If you live in the more temperate or cold climates of Australia, your story is very different. Far from expecting drenching summer rains, temperate and cold climates can usually expect a very dry next few months.

So You Want a Better Garden?

Like the tropical climates, an application of soil wetting agent, if you haven't done so already, would be beneficial. Rather than preparing for lots of water, this is to ensure that any water that does fall makes it to where it needs to be—the roots—and doesn't sit on top of the soil surface for the sun to evaporate.

It may also be time to remove your spring annuals if they are no longer looking healthy. Don't prune annuals, they don't need pruning. If they are looking unhappy it is probably best just to remove them.

Annuals should be fine since they should last a season but this is not always the case. Local nurseries are stocked full of summer annuals and November is a great month to get some more growing.

In most temperate and cool parts of Australia, November is still relatively mild, compared to December-February, so planting summer annuals now will give them a month to prepare for the summer sun.

If you have spring perennial plants that are starting to finish their flowering you might like to consider giving them a prune now. If you have plants that flower from spring through summer, continue to make sure you remove the spent flowers because this will encourage most plants to at least try and flower again.

Spring and summer flowering bottlebrushes are a prime example. Cut off the dead flowers and you will likely get another display sometime during summer. It may be a smaller showing, but that is better than nothing.



Keep an eye on your vegetables and make sure you are watering them regularly. The hot sun will absolutely devastate vegetable plants that are low on water. Good water and the right amounts of shade will significantly help in achieving a healthy vegetable garden this summer.

December Gardening Tips

December is here and this marks the start of summer in Australia. What the garden looks like this month really depends on how well you have prepared for summer. If you mulch your garden, fertilise it, and take the steps I recommended throughout spring, then summer shouldn't really be too bad. However, if your soil is bare, you haven't given it a dose of wetta soil or fertiliser then you still have a bit of work to do.

During summer you need to make sure that your plants are well watered. Mulch helps to hold moisture, so if your garden is well mulched, then you can, most likely, get away with watering once every day to three days. Vegetable gardens need a little more frequent watering. I water mine once a day and twice if the temperature hits 35°+.



I personally like to water early in the morning (before 9 am), especially for garden beds that don't have the morning sun, however watering at night is also fine. Make sure you check if there are any water restrictions in your area. Many places limit or do not allow reticulation during summer and require hand watering. Some places, in extreme droughts, even limit the use of hand watering. Check with your local water authority to find out about your situation.

Some of your plants may wilt a bit more in summer than they do other months. If you have garden beds that either receive full sun or the afternoon sun, perhaps consider adding some shade in the form of shade sails or shade cloth.

During summer it is very important that you look after your grass. Water restrictions are often tough, so it is important to make sure you can make the most use of every drop possible. It is imperative that you have applied wetta soil to your grass or have aerated it with a fork. It is also important that when you mow during summer, you raise the blades a little higher than normal. Longer grass helps protect the root system, keeping it cooler, which helps it to survive and stay as green as possible.

During summer it is a good idea to give your plants, at the very least, a monthly feed with a good fertiliser. All-purpose fertilisers are fine, but if there is a specialist fertiliser, like rose or native fertiliser, use that. It wouldn't hurt to do this fortnightly or even weekly, as long as the fertiliser you choose doesn't say otherwise. If this sounds like too much work, choose a good slow release fertiliser which will usually last a month or so. Again, the container you buy it in will have the correct dosage and frequency.

Keep an eye on your flowering plants. Summer is a regular flowering season for many plants. Once they have finished flowering, give them a light trim either early 143 in the morning or very late in the afternoon or evening. Afternoon or evening is preferred because this gives your plants a night to get used to their new shape.

If you have prepared your garden well, it should handle summer and provide you with a great backdrop for all the summer BBQ's you are going to host. Just keep an eye on everything when watering or walking through the garden. If you notice plants struggling, either increase watering, add mulch where it isn't sufficient, or add some form of shade. Established plants should cope quite well, but younger plants might need a little extra tender loving care.

The Last Word on Monthly Gardening Tips

In general, you can follow these tips year after year and you will cover most of what needs to be done. Obviously, this is not an absolutely exhaustive list, and you will have some very specific things to do depending on the plants that you choose and the location that you live in. Also, every few years you may like to take stock of your garden, noting anything that may have been missed or things that have changed significantly that need addressing. If you follow my advice and plan a five year garden, then perhaps every five years, you should re-check everything more in depth than you do each year. The most important thing is that you can grow to enjoy the process of growing a better garden.

Conclusion

If I can leave you with one phrase it would be 'if at first you don't succeed, try and try again.' Yes, some people pick up gardening really quickly while others take time to get there. However, I am yet to meet someone who hasn't eventually realised the gardener inside when they persevered.

Being a gardener, in my opinion, is a mind set. You just need to see challenges as an opportunity to grow, which is a useful concept when tackling gardening. As you learn to grow plants, you will learn to grow within yourself and discover that, with a little perseverance, and often times a dash of luck, you can have the garden that you desire.

Gardening is fun. Learning about gardening should be fun, too. Don't expect a TV-style garden overnight, give yourself a few years to really get a hold of the gardening trade.

Besides, I don't know about you but I have seen a few TV gardens a year after the fact, and they don't all still look like they did when on TV. Learn lessons from your mistakes, and you too can have a garden that you can be proud of. You can grow a better garden.

Here's to your gardening success!



Photo: James Middleton - Aussie Green Thumb

Gardening Vocabulary Glossary

Do you have trouble understanding the instructions on the back of plant pots, fertilisers, or other gardening products because you don't know what the vocabulary that is used means? Well, here are some of the more common words used in gardening circles and what they mean. This is by no means an exhaustive list but is a 'beginners' glossary to understanding gardening vocabulary. Not every one of these words can be found in this book, nor is every gardening term used in this book likely here. This is simply a good start for any beginner or intermediate gardener.

Words

Acclimatisation:

Acclimatisation can refer to a couple of situations. The first is when plants take some time to get used to their new environment after being planted, either as seedlings or more mature plants. It can be said it takes a while for them to acclimatise. With this in mind it is best to make sure you place your plants in their permanent position when they are first planted because it is during the acclimatisation period they are most vulnerable to pests and diseases and also changing local conditions such as lack of water. Another example of acclimatisation is when you move indoor plants outdoors. It can take a plant that has grown up indoors quite some time to get used to living in a new, outdoor environment.

Annual:

This word is normally used in reference to a particular type of plant. It means that the plant in question takes one full growing season, or one year, to go through all the life stages of plants, from seed germination to death. A plant that is considered annual does not generally live longer than one year, though, in my opinion, the best annuals are ones that self-reproduce and provide a brand new batch of annuals the following season.

Aquatic:

The word aquatic can have many meanings depending on the context that you are speaking within. When it comes to gardening, the term aquatic is applied to plants that either grow completely underwater or partially underwater. Water Lilies are an example of an aquatic plant, with the roots and stems generally growing underwater and then the leaves and flowers appearing on the surface of the water. Underwater grasses would also be considered aquatic plants.

Biennial:

As is the case with many words, the meaning is in the structure of the word. The prefix 'bi' means two in Latin, so a biennial plant is a plant that takes two growing seasons, or two years, to go through its life cycle. In most cases, this means the plant will grow its leaves in the first season and then its flowers and seeds in the second season before dying at the end of its second season. Once again, hopefully a biennial will be replaced the following year by a new batch of seedlings.

Bonsai:

Bonsai is a Japanese technique to grow small or dwarf (see below) varieties of trees in small pots or containers. Some of the main varieties used with the bonsai technique are pine, maple, and juniper trees. The aim of bonsai is to train the plant into a decorative form decided by the owner. This is achieved by both tying the growing stems to very small metal or wooden stakes and by limiting the ability of the trees roots to grow by having it in a small pot. Every year or two, the plant is removed from its pot, the roots are pruned and it is placed into a slightly larger pot or container. Be aware that it is not a short-term commitment and requires much maintenance in trimming and pruning as the plant grows.

Bud:

The bud of a plant can refer to many things but, in general, it is a tightly condensed shoot which is the beginnings of flower, stem, or leaf growth. No flower, stem or leaf develops without first appearing as a bud on a plant. Therefore all growth on a plant first starts out as a bud.

Canopy:

In a forest there are many different layers of life. The word canopy refers to the upper-most part, where the tops of the trees are. They form a canopy over the forest, often either stopping or filtering the light from getting down below. If you want plants to grow below the canopy, then you have to make sure you choose plants that can handle the shade. Equally, if you remove plants that are forming a canopy, make sure you know any plants growing below can handle more sunshine without the protection of the canopy plants.

Complete fertiliser:

There are three main nutrients, besides water, which most plants need to grow, in varying amounts. These are nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. A complete fertiliser is a fertiliser that contains at least some of each of these three main nutrients. Of course, different complete fertilisers will have different levels of each of these nutrients.

Compost:

Many people get confused with the words mulch and compost, and this is understandable, they are sometimes the exact same thing. However, the main purpose is usually different. Mulch is placed around plants to maintain moisture and suppress weeds. Compost is placed around plants to provide nutrients and organic material to help improve the soil in which the plants live. This is why organic mulch can be of great benefit because, as it breaks down, it acts as an effective compost. Compost is most often made of manures or decaying plant matter, such as grass clippings. Sometimes other fertilisers are mixed in with compost.

Deadheading:

This is the process of removing dead or near-dead flowers from a plant. Simply put, while flowers are very, very beautiful, when they are dead or dying they cease to be aesthetically pleasing, therefore removing the deadheaded flowers makes the plant look better. Another reason why a gardener would deadhead a plant is to prevent it from forming seeds, which actually encourages new flowers to form.

Deciduous:

A deciduous plant is one that loses its leaves during winter. What this implies is that the plant is going into a hibernation phase, like many animals do, and will wait until the warm weather returns before it uses its energy for growth. The opposite of a deciduous plant is an evergreen plant, which maintains its leaves all year around. When you are driving around during autumn and see trees with leaves that are turning yellow, orange, red, or brown, you are looking at deciduous trees.

Drainage:

Drainage refers to how fast water will drain away around plants. It also refers to how quickly water will soak into the soil when a plant is watered. Most plants require good drainage because too much water hanging around it can cause roots to rot. Though plants need good access to water, they don't want to be swimming in it. Good drainage means the soil will take in plenty of water but the surrounding plants won't be unhappy with the amount of water hanging around the roots.

Dwarf:

The term dwarf refers to a form or variety of plant that is smaller than another form of the plant. Sometimes this is achieved through a process like bonsai, meaning the plant has the same genetic make-up as other plants of the species. Other times, a dwarf plant is a variety or species that has been bred to specifically grow as a smaller plant without the need to limit its growth manually. See hybrid below for further explanation.

Evergreen:

The term evergreen basically applies to any plant that will always have some foliage. Evergreen plants are plants that do not go into hibernation for any period of time and instead continue to grow and produce leaves all year round.

Family, Genus & Species:

Every single plant belongs to a species, which belongs to a genus, which belongs to a family. There are actually more levels to this classification tree but no more than these 3 is really necessary knowledge. Let's take one variety of Kangaroo Paw, the Haemodoraceae *Anigozanthos manglesii* as an example.

Family – Haemodoraceae

Genus – *Anigozanthos*

Species – *Manglesii*

When you go to a nursery and you look at a plant, it will usually only have the genus and species name as this is all you really need to be able to tell a plant apart. Every species has a different species name. So, as an example, someone might tell you to buy a Kangaroo Paw. So you go to a nursery and ask for one. They then ask “what type are you looking for?” What they are asking for is what species. The name Kangaroo Paw in this example is basically the equivalent of the genus name. There are many types of Kangaroo Paw and each has a different species name. However, all but one Kangaroo Paw has the genus name *Anigozanthos* and the family name Haemodoraceae. As is often the case in English, there are occasionally exceptions to the norm!

3 quick points about botanical names.

- The family name of a plant always ends with *ae*.
- The genus name of a plant always starts with a capital letter.
- The species name of a plant always starts with a lower-case letter.

Why use botanical names and not common names?

Simply put, what you may know as a common name for a plant may not be what other people know as the common name. What you call one plant in Australia may be what someone in America calls an entirely different plant. Botanical names help clear up this problem, while also helping us to understand how various plants are related. This is important when it comes to cross-breeding. Plants that cross-breed best are ones that belong to the same genus, or in other words are just different species of the same plant.

Fertiliser and Manure:

Many people also often confuse compost and manure/fertiliser. This is also because they are sometimes referring to the same thing. When manure is placed around plants it is done so as a compost, aimed at fertilising the plants, or providing nutrients. Manure is an example of organic (matter that was once living or part of a living organism) fertiliser. Much of what we think of as fertiliser, however is inorganic (either from naturally occurring minerals or manufactured from various elements). Therefore a fertiliser is anything added to a plant's environment aimed at providing some form of nutrient to make the plant healthier or grow more vigorously. A fertiliser may be organic (from something once living) in nature or inorganic (mineral or manufactured chemical) in nature. Manure is therefore one example of an organic fertiliser.

Frost Hardy/Frost Tolerant:

The term frost hardy is actually very much dependent on the climate that plants are growing in, but in general a plant can be said to be 'frost hardy' if a plant will not die if it has to go through some frost conditions. The key points to whether a plant is frost hardy or not are: a) can the leaves survive frost temperatures and conditions without experiencing damage (eg. evergreen shrubs) and b) can the stems and/or buds of the plant survive frost temperatures and conditions (eg. deciduous shrubs). Keep in mind that one plant that is said to be frost hardy in a temperate zone may not be as frost hardy in a cold weather zone because the depth of the frost will differ.

Germination:

The term germination applies to the first stage of development a seed begins the process of becoming a plant. When the seed starts to grow, the seed shell breaks, a seedling bursts forth, and grows towards the surface, eventually breaking through to grow into a plant. When the seed shell breaks it can be said that the seed has germinated. Some seeds will lay dormant for a long time before they germinate, programmed specifically to wait for just the right environmental conditions.

Grafting:

Grafting is taking the stem or bud of one variety and joining it together with the stem or stem base of another variety of the same plant. Some grafts work better than others and some plants are more receptive to grafting, hence why the actual process of grafting is best left for intermediate or experienced gardeners. The resultant, grafted plant will have a blend of characteristics of the two parent varieties and the process can lead to more hardy plant varieties or produce more beautiful flowers.

Ground Cover:

A ground cover is a plant that naturally grows along the ground, forming a cover of the ground around its root system. Ground covers are great for filling up empty space in and around other, larger plants. They are also fantastic because they help suppress the growth of weeds by limiting the space in which weeds are able to grow. Sometimes if you really like a particular plant but think it is growing too big, looking for a ground cover variety can be beneficial.

Hardy:

This term is used to describe plants that can survive harsh local conditions. In colder climates, hardy plants are plants that can best survive the cold winter weather or frosts. In warmer climates, hardy plants are usually plants that can survive hot temperatures and possibly lack of regular rainfall. The term may also be used to describe plants that are easy to grow, or hard for even the inexperienced gardener to kill.

Humus:

Humus is formed when organic matter breaks down. It is a dark brown residue, formed when vegetable matter breaks down. The term can also be applied to compost formed when leaf litter or grass clippings are partially decayed, which forms a brown, crumbly humus.

Hybrid:

A hybrid is a plant produced by combining two plants together, which is achieved by grafting. This is done to produce a plant with a mix of characteristics from the two parent plants. Usually the two plants that are combined are of the same species or genus because this is the best way to get a successful mix. This process is also one way a dwarf variety can be developed. Many forms of corn we use today were produced by this method.

Inorganic:

A term applied to substances not containing carbon molecules, meaning they were not formed by a living organism. In gardening terms, an inorganic substance is usually a naturally occurring mineral that helps plants grow or manufactured chemicals made to help plants grow.

Insecticide:

An insecticide is a substance used to kill insect pests that cause problems on plants. Insecticides can be found in many forms. They are mostly liquids or powders but can also be a smoke or a vapour. Insecticides need to be used with caution because not all insects have positive effects on plants, in fact, many plants need insects for healthy growth and reproduction. Many insecticides do not only kill damaging insects but also kill helpful insects.

Leaching:

Leaching is a process that can be both good and bad for your soil. When something is said to be leaching out of your soil, it means that it is disappearing. For example, over time the fertiliser that you add to your soil will leach out, because as more and more water is applied, the fertiliser will be pulled further into the soil or washed away entirely. Now, leaching is a good thing when it removes excess substances, or substances like salts that aren't required in high doses, but it is also bad because all your good nutrients will also leach away over time. The fertiliser you add does not all get used by the plants, much of it leaches away. This is one of the reasons why you have to regularly top-up the nutrients that you have in your soil.

Loam:

Loam is the name given to good, fertile soil. Loam is not wet and sticky nor dry and sandy. When you pick up fertile soil it should hold together but, unless it has just been watered, not leave your hand overly wet. Loam is made up of clay, humus, sand, and silt and also is rich with trace elements or minerals that most plants require to grow well.

Mulch:

Rather than specifically defining mulch, I will explain, very briefly, its purpose. Mulch is a layer of material, usually but not always organic, like manure, peat, or straw, placed around plants to help maintain moisture. Mulch is also used to help suppress the growth of weeds around plants. Organic mulches work best because they break down and help fertilise the plants they are surrounding.

NPK:

When looking at buying fertiliser you may see listed on the label somewhere a number that looks something like this: NPK 5:6:4 This NPK figure basically explains the amount of the three main nutrients present in a complete fertiliser and that can also be found in many other fertilisers. The first number refers to nitrogen (chemical symbol N), the second number refers to phosphorus (chemical symbol P), and the third number stands for potassium (chemical symbol K). So 5:6:4 would mean that fertiliser contains 5 parts nitrogen, 6 parts phosphorus, and 4 parts potassium.

Native:

A plant that is indigenous, or originally occurring, in the area being described can be considered native. For example, Australian native plants are plants that were found living naturally in Australia; they were not imported from another country. It is better to be more specific about a species' native habitat. A plant naturally occurring in Western Australia may never have naturally occurred in New South Wales, so it would be more truthful to call it a West Australian native. Some native plants are found all over the country that they live in, others are only located in specific pockets, and therefore may not grow as well in other parts of even their native country. This is why it is sometimes best to find out which plants are native to your specific area, not just the country you are living in, when choosing native plants.

Nectar:

Nectar is a substance that is produced by flowers to attract birds, bees, and other various wildlife. It is made up of sugars and waters, which is food for many types of wildlife. When birds and bees stop by and collect the nectar from flowers, they have to press in past the pollen to get to it, and some of this pollen will stick so that the next time the bird or bee flies to a similar flower, there is a good chance it will get pollinated. As such, nectar is a critical part of most plants reproductive cycle.

Organic:

Organic refers to substances that are generally created by living organisms and usually contain carbon molecules. They are often used to add nutrients to the soil to help a plant grow. Animal manure and compost formed by rotting plants are prime examples of organic substances which may be added to a garden to make it healthier. Organic substances are not manufactured, they are natural by-products of living, naturally occurring processes.

Peat:

Peat is an organic matter which does not contain large amounts of minerals or trace elements that have been added to soil to help improve it. When peat breaks down, it forms humus (defined later) and this helps improve the soil. In particular, it is good to add peat to dry, sandy soils in order to help make the soil less dry and sandy.

Perennial:

Perennials are plants that have a life cycle that is longer than two years. Therefore most plants, to my knowledge, fall under the perennial category. Exactly when a perennial plant reproduces differs greatly, depending on the species. The main factor is that they do not grow and die in one or two seasons but continue to live on for multiple growing seasons.

pH:

This is a scientific term used in the gardening world to help us understand when soil is healthy. By understanding the pH level of soil we can work out what it is lacking to be considered fertile. Fertile soil, loam, has a pH around 6-7. pH itself is a scale that informs us what the level of acidity in any given soil is. pH stands for 'potential of Hydrogen.' Soils with a low pH are highly acidic and soils with a high pH are highly alkaline, the opposite of acidic.

Propagation:

If you start with one plant and you end up with more plants, you have propagated the new plants. There are 2 types of propagation;

1) Seminal: This is propagation by planting seeds. One plant produces seeds. You plant these seeds. They germinate and grow into new plants.

2) Vegetative: This is propagation by cutting or grafting. Sometimes you can cut a piece off of a plant, place it in the soil, and it will form roots and grow. In this case you have taken one plant, removed part of it, and turned it into two plants. Another example is taking a piece from two different species (but usually from the same genus) and grafting them together, forming a hybrid. This results in a third plant being propagated.

Pruning:

This is the removal of part of the plant to either restrict its size, shape the plant, or promote flowers or fruit to grow. It may seem strange, but for many plants, the loss of some of the plant, via cutting, encourages it to grow, or produce fruit, more vigorously. This is especially the case when the pruning involves the removal of dead or dying limbs. IMPORTANT NOTE: Do not go out and prune a plant without first doing a little bit of research into the best times for that particular plant. Some require mid-flower pruning, others require after-flower pruning.

Retaining Wall:

A retaining wall is a wall that is built on a slope. This can be done for a few reasons but the main reasons are to make two or more flat area's, avoiding a slope, or to provide strength and support, stopping soil from sliding or eroding away. This might be in a garden or as part of a building.

Seedlings:

The term seedlings can and is used to describe a few different things. Technically, a seedling is a plant with only one un-branched stem. It is what is produced immediately following the germination of a seed. However, in many cases, the term seedling is applied to any young plant with only a few leaves or stems; this is often what nurseries refer to as seedlings.

Seeds:

Seeds are what many, but not all, plants grow to reproduce. Seeds come in all shapes and sizes but are basically small bundles of DNA material from parent plant(s) (depending on whether the plant reproduces sexually or asexually) wrapped in some sort of protective material.

Seeds are produced either on the inside or outside of the fruit of a plant. Fruit is generally produced following the flowering of a plant.

Specimen Plant:

A specimen plant is any plant that is placed in such a position that it becomes the feature, or focus, of the garden it is placed in. Some plants make better specimen plants than others. An example of a relatively common specimen plant in Australia is the Australian Grass Tree.

Succulent:

The main feature of a plant that is called a succulent is its ability to conserve water. Succulents normally have large, fleshy stems or leaves specifically designed to store water so that the plant is able to survive in climates where rainfall may be minimal. Oftentimes, if you were to break open the stem or leaf of a succulent plant, the broken stem or leaf will ooze large amounts of water. The aloe vera plant is an example of a succulent. Many groups of people world-wide rely on succulent plants for finding water in harsh conditions where rainfall is sporadic at best.

Staking:

Quite simply, some plants require a little help as they grow because they become top-heavy, that is, the top of the plant is heavier than the base or root system can support. In such cases, it is helpful to stake them. This means to stick a piece of wood, metal, or anything else that is sturdy next to the growing plant and, as it grows, tie the new 'top' loosely (this is the key) to the stake.

This way, the stake is providing support but the tie is not restricting the plants growth, both upwards and in terms of the thickness of the growing stems or branches. If, after you have staked a plant, the ties look like they are causing a problem, simply loosen them or move them to a different area of the growing stem or branch.

Tap Root:

A tap root is the main root of a plant. Even though plants normally have many roots, they generally have one main root from which all or most of the other roots come from. The tap root goes down deep, provides a lot of nutrients, and is also, quite often, one of the main support bearing roots for plants and trees. Many plants require the tap root to be intact if you are going to have any hope of transplanting them to a new location. Some plants require the tap root to undergo as little stress as possible in the transplanting process, with a good amount of soil left around the tap root from the original location of the plant.

Thinning:

There are two main times the term 'thinning' could be used in gardening.

1) When many seeds have been planted and have germinated, some are removed to help the other seedlings grow better, therefore thinning the amount of seedlings vying for the nutrients that are in the soil.

2) When a plant is growing, sometimes some new stems or branches are removed. This is for similar reasons to those for thinning with seedlings. It takes a great deal of energy to grow many stems or branches, if there are less stems or branches, the energy the plant exerts can be focussed on growing the remaining stems and branches.

In both cases, the aim of thinning is to encourage growth. It is similar to the process of pruning, in that, sometimes for a plant to grow in a healthy manner, it needs to have less of itself to focus its energy on.

Topiary:

This is another word to describe the process of clipping, trimming, and training trees into a specific shape. The art of training a bonsai plant is a form of the art of topiary on a small scale. However, topiary can also be used on larger plants or shrubs. When you walk around and see delicately shapes trees or hedges, that is a form of topiary.

Trace Elements:

Plants function by taking nutrients from the soil and making them into various products that they need. These nutrients are usually an element of some kind. A trace element is any element that a plant requires for healthy growth that is usually naturally occurring in small amounts within fertile soil. In fact, it is the presence of trace elements that makes a soil fertile or infertile.

Transplanting:

This term simply means moving a plant from one location to a new location. A lot of care must be taken when transplanting. Some plants transplant better than others and almost always more so when they are young seedlings as opposed to older, more mature plants. It is best to make sure you have positioned your plants where you plan them to be forever when you first plant them because there is no guarantee they will survive a transplant.

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