

It's definitely not spring yet. But if you're itching to start gardening you might want to pull some weeds. Weedy tenacious tendrils slide out of soggy ground better this time of year. Just be careful not to compact your soil while you're walking around pulling up those weeds.

Perhaps a better pastime would be to visit local nurseries or take a walk around your neighborhood to check out what's growing. If you're planning to expand your garden, improve it, or just add a few more plants or shrubs now's the perfect time to see how they'll look in the dead of winter.

Stroll through your area (or drive slowly if walking's too chilly). Take notice of how tall the shrubs and trees get. Note how the foliage looks when it's dead or dormant. If your neighbors are out ask them the names of their plants that interest you. Talk to them about where they purchased or found their plants. Most gardeners are quite willing to share their knowledge or love of plants.

If you want to discover more about the names and growing conditions of plants go to one of our many local nurseries. Nursery plants are labeled with plant names and growing conditions. If not, most nursery staff should help answer your questions. If they don't willingly help you, take your business elsewhere.

You might even want to buy a plant and bring it home. It really is a great time to plant shrubs and woody plants in the garden. Look for plants with buds or even some blossoms already if they're winter blooming plants. I always try to buy shrubs or plants that are blooming or in bud because then I know they'll continue to do so. Sometimes a plant is supposed to flower but it seems as if it takes years. One of my mottos is buy plants that will bloom the year you buy them.

Look for evergreen shrubs, winter blooming heathers, Red-twig Dogwood, roses, Hellebores, even pots of bulbs that have already sprouted. Once you select a plant and take it home you'll want to get it in the soil soon. Use a spade or, better yet, try a spading fork. If you've never tried a spading fork you're in for a treat. The best kind has a fiberglass handle. Use your selected digging tool and dig a "one hundred dollar hole for a ten dollar plant." You'll dig the hole two or more times bigger around than the container the plant is in. Take the plant out of the plastic or cardboard pot. If it's wrapped in burlap follow the same procedure and remove the burlap. Notice if the hole you've dug has water standing in the bottom. If so, don't plant there. Your plant would have soggy roots and eventually die.

Loosen up the soil around the roots of the plant. If the plant is root-bound, use a sharp knife and slice through the roots in several places to loosen them. Place the plant in the hole making sure the old and new soil levels are the same. You may have been told to mix peat in the hole; it's not a good practice. Trust me, don't do it. Don't add fertilizer either. Most nursery plants have an overabundance of fertilizer already in their soil, enough to fertilize your plant for quite a while. (We'll talk about soil amendments and fertilizers in a later column.) Fill in the rest of the hole with the remaining soil. Press the soil down, but don't compact it. Water your plant if it hasn't rained for a few days. Your new plant will be well settled in by spring.

To learn more about plants and how to select and care for them, visit your local library. Look in the 635 decimal section. You'll find a seemingly endless supply of books on gardening. Visit your local bookstore's gardening section. Many nurseries have great books on gardening. You can also visit numerous sites on the Internet. My favorite search engine is Google.com. Key in the word "Garden" and see what happens. Or you can even key in the names of plants that interest you. You'll be amazed by the information you'll find. If you don't have a computer or access to the Internet at home, visit your local library and use theirs. The librarians are usually happy to show you how to surf the net. You can email me at gardenmentor@yahoo.com with your gardening questions too.

My final tip for today's column is don't trim those roses yet, it's much too early. Next week I'll tell you about roses and two of our own treasured rose experts right here in Kitsap County. While you wait, you can still catch the NW Flower and Garden Show. Until next week, Happy Gardening.