

This is the real time of year to make New Year's resolutions. My gardening resolutions for this year are to keep better records of what I plant where and how. Record keeping can seem tedious, but if we all take a few minutes each week to do this chore we'll be happier next year when we're again planning and planting our gardens.

Those who regularly read this column know that one of my mottos is "Gardening is fun." So you're probably muttering, "How can record keeping be fun?" Well, read on for some suggestions and tips.

Everyone has a different style both of gardening and of keeping records. Adapt the method that will work best and be the most enjoyable and efficient for you. It can be as simple as taking photos of plantings, noting dates and locations on the back of the photos; or noting details on a calendar or in a spiral notebook.

Try saving the tags that come with new plants. Tape the tags to an index card and note any details you want to remember such as how much you paid for the plant, where and when it was purchased, and its location in your garden. Also note any special care instructions you want to remember. You could even use different colored cards (i.e. separate colors for perennials, herbs, woody shrubs, trees, vegetables). You'll also want to note weather conditions such as rainfall, temperatures, snow and frost dates.

If you grow a vegetable garden you'll want to note where you purchased your seeds, how long they took to germinate, and how the fruits of your labors tasted. Then in the dead of winter when all those great seed catalogues start pouring in, you'll be better able to remember where you purchased your favorite seeds.

It's also a good idea to create a map of your vegetable garden. Don't worry about how true to scale it is, the important thing is to show what you planted where. Many vegetables grow better if they are rotated in the bed. Additionally, it fools the bad bugs when they go looking to nibble on little seedlings or on root crops. Many crops replace or leach certain nutrients out of the soil. Crop rotation helps replace these nutrients.

Record keeping is especially helpful if you're renovating or newly landscaping your garden. My favorite way to do this is through photographs. Purchase a photo album that gives space to write a few notes next to the photos. You'll be amazed in a few months or in a year when you look back and see how much work you accomplished. You'll also be astounded by how quickly plants grow and fill in the landscape. I've been sporadic sometimes about some of my record keeping efforts, but every year I've taken photos and have always enjoyed looking back to see how our garden has grown and flourished.

If you decide to purchase a garden journal for record keeping, make sure it has room to include many of the tips I've already listed. At the least make sure it has plenty of room to draw planting diagrams, make notes about plants and has room for any photos or plant tags you'd like to save. One year I found a journal that had envelopes at the back to store the tags or any receipts I wanted to save. Many journals list tasks to be done each month and give tips about planting and harvesting for particular times of the year. In that case, make sure the journal applies to our specific growing conditions in the maritime northwest.

Hopefully you'll all try your luck at keeping gardening records this year. Here's one more tip to help you plan out your garden. I have a business called "Gardening Mentor" and one of the things I do is help my clients decide what plants to place where in their landscape. I'm a very visual person and one of my clients is too. I had this brainstorm and we both thought you'd all like to try it.

If you're trying to decide how much space plants will take up in your garden use newspaper or a grocery sack and cut a circles the size of the plants' diameter at maturity. Arrange the papers using rocks or sticks to hold them in place. Move the papers around until you're satisfied with their placement, then race to the nursery, buy those plants and plant away.

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