

June and July many of us are still planting vegetables and potting up containers and hanging baskets. Here are a few great ideas gleaned in the last two weeks. Fay Linger and I harvested tips from Seattle Pea Patches we visited recently and the pea patches planted the seeds for our own ideas. I also discovered a moisture retaining product for containers and hanging baskets. I think you'll want to try it for yourselves.

Piles of burlap bags were stockpiled for use in each of the pea patches. Instead of newspapers and cardboard the gardeners use burlap to keep pathways weed free. A few raised beds, resting from winter, were layered with decomposing layers of grass, straw and chopped up leaves, covered over with burlap. Each resting raised bed was a mini compost pile.

Burlap bags keep garden plots weed-free all winter and early spring, but can be used other seasons too. Gardeners remove the burlap, mix up all the ingredients and plant away into nourishing, rich composted soil. Additionally the burlap layer helps soil warm up quickly.

If you plan to collect burlap for your gardening use, assure that it is pesticide and herbicide free. Some burlap is coated with substances to repel insects or prevent seeds from sprouting. Also know that burlap biodegrades quite slowly. Burlap makes great shade cloths, covers for paths and weed barriers. You'll definitely get quite a few years use from burlap. I found burlap bags locally at Sack's and Cenex for a dollar. Sack's has several bags available each week and Cenex can order it by the bushel.

If you haven't tried water holding granules for container and hanging basket plantings you're in for a real treat. I bought a sixteen-ounce container of a product called "Soil Moist" for twelve dollars. One container will last about two to three years or more depending on how many containers you're potting up. The secret ingredient is the stuff they put in disposable diapers to absorb the moisture generated by babies.

The water retaining crystals are way cool. But don't do what I did. I didn't thoroughly read the directions. Duh! The granules have to be buried several inches under the plants' roots. I mixed it a few inches deep into the soil in existing planters and when it rains, or we water, this interesting goo expands onto the top of the soil (looks like a jell or melting ice). It melts eventually (over two or three days). Fortunately the plants didn't mind my mistake.

Poulsbo Garden Club member Connie Goodie says she pre-moistens the granules in a bucket and then mixes it in with her composted soil or potting soil before planting. She says the granules hold and release water to the plants for several years. A good investment of twelve bucks I think.

For already planted containers you can use a dowel and poke holes down into the container and pour in a small amount of the granules. Fill the hole up with soil, water and you're all set. I'm going to try this method. The directions (if you read them) say this works, which I'm sure it does.

I can tell you that the barrels we used the Soil Moist in formerly dried out really rapidly (under one day) and now the soil retains moisture for at least three days and on cloudy cooler days the moisture lasts for about a week. Also the granules add air and texture to the soil. Dense, dry, powdery soil is now crumbly and healthy. Give it a try and report back to me via email or snail mail.

At Raab Park we're experimenting with a shade house to grow lettuce. Our garden has full sun eight to twelve hours a day depending on the time of year. It's really HOT up there. We've taken two sections of lattice and make a shade tent for lettuce. We enlisted young Kyle Rencher to fasten twine all along the lattice (like a hinge); in the fall we'll fold the lattice flat and store it. The kids will plant runner beans all along the edge of the tent and will plant lettuce inside the lattice tent. The beans will shade the lettuce as both crops grow.

Send comments or questions to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.