

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 6-20-07) Tips on Avoiding Plant Problems © 2007

Mary Robson, retired Washington State University Horticulture Educator, offered several tips at a recent workshop. Her tips on solving and avoiding plant problems were too good to keep to myself and are always good reminders.

The best way to have healthy plants is to have healthy soil. You'd be amazed at how well your plants will do with good soil. If you can't build up your soil by bringing in amendments, try composting. You'll find compost classes offered locally throughout the year conducted by the Master Composters. Robson said, "If you have poor soil, then select plants that like to grow in those conditions. Always remember, right plant right place."

Robson recommends learning about your own garden's climate and growing conditions before putting in a lot of new plants. It's good to pick the four calendar solstices dates and take photos of the areas of your garden noting the sun, rain and weather conditions on those four days. After you've put together a record of the garden year on your property you can decide better where to site your plants. You'll also want to learn about the first and last frost dates in your garden. Record keeping can be as simple as noting details on a calendar or keeping a record in a file on your computer. Taking additional photos through your gardening year will provide additional detail. All this data will provide a baseline for you to work from in planning and planting your garden.

It's a great idea to combine annuals along with perennials to fill in spaces between permanent plantings. We gardeners tend to put plants too close together. Plant herbaceous plants (perennials, shrubs and trees) in order to give them good circulation and then fill in with bulbs, grasses and annuals, Robson recommends. Also avoid putting herbs in "soggy soils." She said, "The best thing to do for most herbs is give them good drainage and lots of sun."

A few of Robson's plant recommendations are: plant Eastern Moon tulips which continue to bloom each year; PJM rhody resists powdery mildew, root weevils and is tolerant to sun and hard freezes; and mix roses in with herbs in plantings because the herbs help attract beneficial insects and they add texture and interest.

Remember too that some plant diseases seem to be specific to certain species and cultivars. As an example, if you can't stand mildew on hollyhocks you may want to consider planting annuals other than hollyhocks. You may want to purchase species of certain plants rather than hybrids since sometimes cultivars can develop problems that the parent plant does not have. What each gardener needs to determine is how much damage or disease in a plant is tolerable. If you don't like notches on rhodendrons then choose a variety that is resistant to root weevils. If slugs eat certain plants in your garden down to oblivion, then you may want to plant something with wrinkly leaves or prickly foliage that slugs avoid.

Retired WSU horticulture educator, Ray Malieke said, “We met the enemy and they were us.” Robson said, “Gardeners are ever optimistic and always learning.” She said we may make lots of mistakes as gardeners but that’s all right because we always get the opportunity to plant more when we don’t quite get it right or succeed at first.