

8 common gardening MISTAKES

Gardening is all about trial and error, but who wants the errors? Learn how to avoid some common mistakes—and enjoy your best gardening season ever.

by Teresa O'Connor
illustrations by Travis Foster

Whether we're beginners or experts, we've all made mistakes in the garden. Sometimes it's a matter of overwatering or underwatering. Sometimes we put a plant in the wrong place. Or maybe we don't amend the soil properly. Making mistakes is part of the process—but it's nice to avoid them altogether. Here are eight common gardening mistakes and how to prevent them:

MISTAKE 1 **drowning or** **underwatering plants**

Some gardeners water too much, and others don't water enough. Neither is a good idea. Too much water makes plants susceptible to pests and diseases like root rot. Too little water weakens plants and eventually kills them.

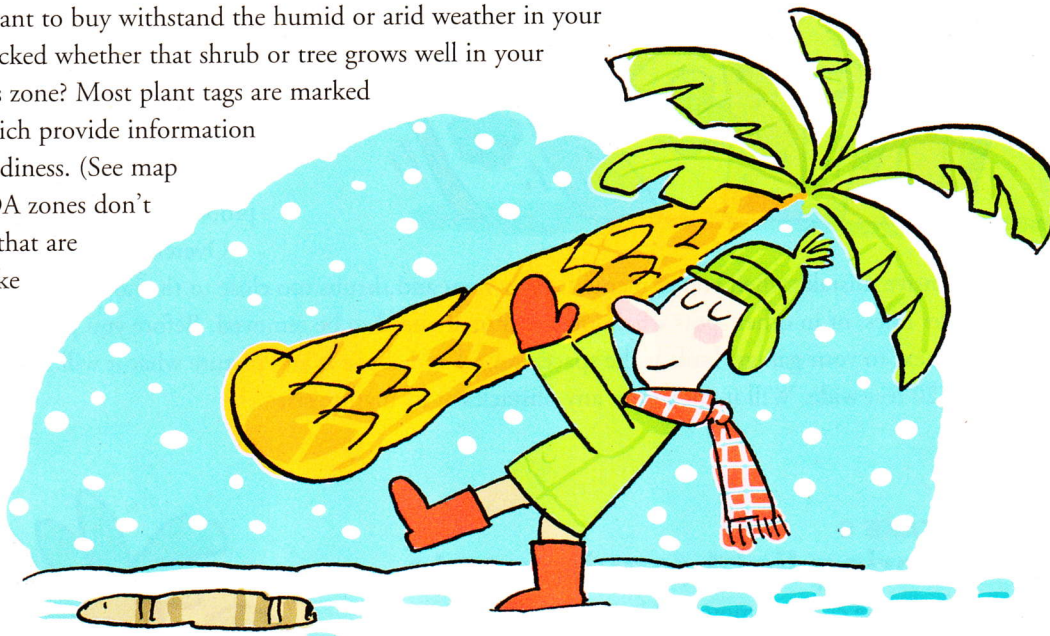
Although containers need to be watered once or more daily in hot weather, ground plants rarely do, especially with several inches of mulch. Sandy soil requires more frequent watering than clay or loam. Regardless of your soil type, make sure you water near the roots and avoid wetting foliage. Irrigate in the morning to allow plants to dry off before evening.



MISTAKE 2

picking the wrong plants

We've all tried to grow plants that just don't work in our climate. Think carefully about your growing conditions before you shop—not when you're already at the garden center. Will that pretty perennial you want to buy withstand the humid or arid weather in your climate? Have you checked whether that shrub or tree grows well in your area's USDA hardiness zone? Most plant tags are marked with USDA zones, which provide information on the plant's cold hardiness. (See map on page 48.) But USDA zones don't consider other factors that are important to plants, like wind, altitude, heat, and humidity. Check with neighbors, local nurseries, and master gardeners to get ideas for what grows best in your climate.



MISTAKE 3

overlooking the soil

Many gardeners overlook the garden soil. Yet healthy soil is critical to a garden's success.

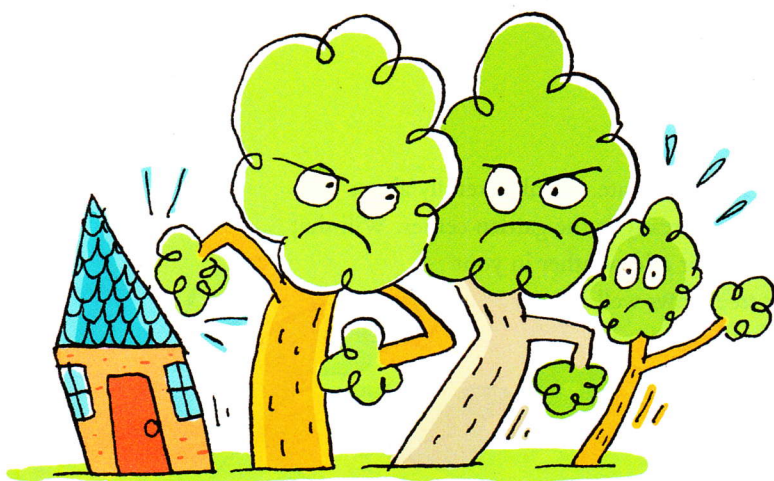
Is your soil sand, clay, or loam? Sandy soil has excellent drainage, but it doesn't retain water and nutrients well. Clay soil doesn't need as much water or fertilizer as sandy soil, but it isn't suitable for plants that require excellent drainage. That's why loamy soil is ideal for most plants, because it has a good balance between sand and clay. Loam retains water and nutrients better than sandy soil, but has better drainage than clay. To make your soil loamier, amend it regularly with compost, well-aged manure, and other organic matter.

Gardeners also tend to overlook the soil's pH level (a measurement of the soil's acidity and alkalinity). Many plants grow in a range of pH levels, but some will suffer nutritional deficiencies if the soil has the wrong pH. If your soil is alkaline (above pH 7) it won't be easy to grow plants like blueberries and azaleas, which require acidic soil (below pH 7). To determine your soil's pH levels, order a test from your local cooperative extension office or purchase a kit from a garden center.

MISTAKE 4

taking on too much

It's easy to get excited in the early phases of garden planning and underestimate the time it will take to actually plant, weed, irrigate, and maintain that space. Be realistic about how many hours you can give your garden during the growing season. You'll save yourself a headache if you pick one small part of your yard to design and plan this year. Save the rest for future seasons.



MISTAKE 5 **crowding plants**

Nobody ever believes their plants will grow to the size on the labels, yet they often grow even larger than that. Always consider the plant's mature size to ensure you've allowed enough space. When plants are too close together, they lack air circulation and suffer more pest and disease problems.

Overcrowding plants becomes an especially

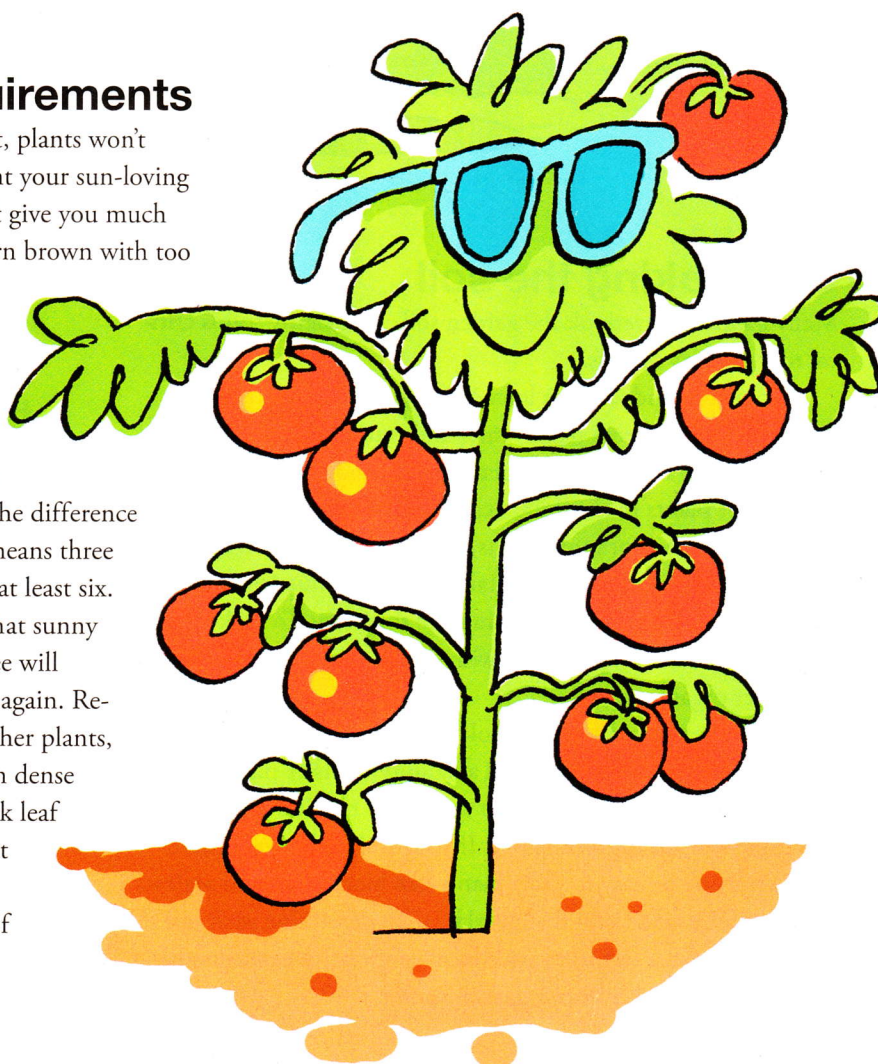
expensive mistake when you've planted costly trees and shrubs too close to the house or other buildings, underneath power lines, or in other spots where they eventually need to be removed. Before you plant that cute little 3-foot-tall tree next to your garage, look at the space around and above it and picture what it will look like when it's 40 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Will it encounter any obstacles at its mature size?

MISTAKE 6 **ignoring light requirements**

Without the correct amount of light, plants won't reach their full potential. If you plant your sun-loving vegetable plants in shade, they won't give you much of a yield—and shade plants will turn brown with too much sun.

To determine how much sun you have in a specific spot, watch carefully throughout the day to see precisely what time the sun first reaches that spot and what time the evening shade falls. Then calculate the difference between those times. Partial shade means three to six hours of light; full sun means at least six.

Light changes over time, too. That sunny spot in winter under a deciduous tree will become shady when the leaves grow again. Remember that plants cast shade on other plants, too. And there's a difference between dense shade (such as that under a low, thick leaf canopy) and light shade (such as that under a high, thin leaf canopy), so look for plants that prefer the type of shade you have.



MISTAKE 7

spending without a plan

When spring finally arrives, it's tempting to rush to the nursery and buy each new plant that catches your eye. Once home, you wonder where you're going to plant your purchases—and you realize you have a mishmash of different colors and types of plants that don't look good together.

Instead, draw up a rough plan before going to the nursery. (You don't have to list specific cultivars. Something like "Four to five tall yellow sun-loving plants for corner by the garage" will provide helpful limits while still giving you plenty of choices.) That way, you'll buy only the plants you need and enjoy a well-designed garden that's more than a collection of individual plants.

Garden designers recommend plant groupings in odd numbers like one, three, or five for informal gardens and groupings of even-numbered plants for formal gardens. Whatever design you select, be sure to consider four-season interest. How will those plants look throughout the year? Combine plants with similar growing needs (full sun, drought-tolerant, and so on) in the garden.



MISTAKE 8

forgetting to maintain

There are always distractions to keep you away from the garden. Just remember, it's easier to fix problems early than to wait until the damage is out of control. Spend a few minutes each day looking for potential pests or tackling weeds as they appear.

Consider ways to save time and effort. By adding several inches of mulch to your garden beds, you can reduce weeding, save water, regulate soil temperatures, and prevent fungal diseases from splashing on plant foliage. Not bad for an afternoon's work.

Most of all, remember to have fun. It's easy to get overwhelmed with all the chores, but ultimately, gardening is about spending time enjoying nature. And keeping these eight common gardening mistakes in mind will go a long way toward making that time more pleasurable.

*Teresa O'Connor was trained as a master gardener in California and Idaho. She is the co-author of *Grocery Gardening: Planting, Preparing and Preserving Fresh Foods* (Cold Springs Press, 2010).*



To read about members' most memorable gardening mistakes, visit www.gardeningclub.com and click on WebExtras.