

\*\*\*\*\* A \*\*\*\*\*  
**Greenhorn's Guide**

\*\*\*\*\* to \*\*\*\*\*

# Gardening

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## Or How I Learned to Relax and Deal With Thrips on My Ficus

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**S**hortly after moving into our new house, I had a wonderful dream. My yard was a lush oasis amidst the urban blight, a thing of beauty, a source of envy. Neighbors begged to sniff my perfect roses and roll around on my putting-green lawn. People from far and wide brought their ailing plants for me to heal with a touch of my hand. When the adoring throng left, I retreated to the pastoral solitude of my backyard to fuss over the fuchsias, think great thoughts and commune with Mother Nature.

When I awoke, reality seemed harsher than usual. In the front yard, the landscape was still lunar—all rocks and dirt. (Our first Easter there, we hid the kids' eggs in tumbleweed and gopher holes.) At least there was healthy growth in the back—weeds thick enough to hide a secret CIA airbase.

When it comes to gardening, I'm mostly thumbs, none of them green. But every home needs a lawn and garden, a place to unwind, somewhere for the kids to play without knee-pads. Unfortunately, we could no more afford a gardener than a live-in manicurist. It fell to my wife and me to honcho the landscaping of our dream house, a notion that would have sent plants fleeing, if they only could.

It turns out that we're part of a growing phenomenon—or another sign that the world is going to hell. Gardening is on an upswing,

says John Bauman, general manager of Palos Verdes Begonia Farm in Torrance, and the California Nurseryman's Association forecasts that trend will continue through the '90s.

Local nurseries report legions of novice gardeners eagerly descending on them to buy plants, fertilizers, insecticides, tools, birdfeeders and ceramic frog planting pots. There are many reasons given for this fertile frenzy. A decent landscape job can add up to 20 percent to a home's resale value. Gardening is good outdoor exercise and a therapeutic recess from jobs and other grown-up stuff. And digging around in the dirt "connects" you to the land in a much more organic way than your mortgage does.

People who think about such things say it's all part of a yuppie trend called "cocooning"—a move away from bars and Club

By Robert Pickard

**I**t turns out roses are more sensitive than a roomful of unpublished poets. Most of ours have turned a sickly yellow-green and are covered with leprous splotches from a disease called rust.

Meds back toward family life. It's a nauseating term for something well-meaning, although a lot of innocent plants are dying in the process.

"We're seeing a lot of people in their late 20s to early 40s who are real neophyte gardeners," says Bauman. "Many of them have been living in condos or apartments and now have their first home with a yard. They want to garden—they remember helping their folks in the yard back in the *Leave It To Beaver* days.

"It's amazing. Many of them don't know which end of the petunia to stick in the ground. They're making a lot of mistakes, but they want to learn."

Like me, most of them have lots to learn. If you're an avid gardener, most of what follows is obvious; but if you're a beginner, here's some advice from local experts on how to approach landscaping your yard.

### **What To Do After You Buy 'Em**

First of all, try to remember that plants are living things, not decorations. They have wants and needs like you and me. They like to drink and eat regularly, get some sun, and keep clean and well groomed. The difference is, they eat fertilizer and are groomed with shears and rakes.

Seems simple enough, but nursery people say many customers buy plants on impulse and often ignore advice on how to keep them alive. They like the shopping part better than the gardening part.

"People will come in to decorate their house for a party and drop hundreds of dollars," says Sandie Romero of International Garden and Floral Design in El Segundo. "Then they'll take a bunch of fuchsias home and put them in the sun. Well, fuchsias love the shade. After a week, the poor plants are pretty stressed out. After two weeks, they're just fried.

"Then the customer will come back to us and say, 'The plants *you* sold me died.' They act like it's our fault."

The old defective plant routine. It's a desperate ruse, one I've tried myself. It's understandable. You plant some things, they look great for a while, and then they start dying faster than Russians in a Rambo movie. Shame and confusion sets in: You're wiping out your little green brothers.

Ease up. Even though plants have high-falutin' Latin names and nurseries

stock a wider variety of obscure chemicals than Timothy Leary's medicine cabinet, the experts say basic gardening is no more complex than quantum mechanics. You too can have a decent yard without making it your second career. But you've got to start slowly, have reasonable expectations, ask questions, listen to the answers, and be willing to spend some quality time in your garden.

If you have lots of land to scape, you can save time—and often money—by hiring your local nursery people to visit your home and do a landscaping plan. Plans range in price from \$30 to a few hundred, depending on the detail. You can get a general consultation or a blueprint drawn to scale with every sprinkler head in place and the exact number of one- and five-gallon plants you'll need. They'll suggest a suitable range of plants for each area, and you'll make the final selections.

As your planned landscape evolves, it will look like it was, well, planned—not like a series of impulses, afterthoughts and plain bad decisions, ending in fried fuchsias and 50-foot trees that crack driveways into jigsaw puzzles. A plan can definitely save you money. I could have bought enough plans for a stealth bomber with the money I've spent replacing misplaced plants—and the cracked driveway.

### **A Slow Start**

With or without a plan, the experts recommend proceeding slowly with your landscaping, especially if you're a beginner. Some learning by killing is inevitable, but let's not get sloppy about it. Pick a small area to start with—that way, you'll learn how much work gardening really is, and how much you're willing and able to give it, without endangering too many plants.

Once you've chosen your area, pick your plants. Most people choose by color preference, price, coin flips, anything except what the poor plant needs to survive. My wife and I are perfect examples. She wanted roses because they're pretty. I hated them because as a kid I regularly got tangled up in my mom's rose bushes. Then my wife chose callalilies. She thought them delicate yet dramatic; I thought they looked like my deaf grandpa's ear trumpets. Besides, we needed eight of them, and each one cost more than a dinner out. We planted them anyway.

I proved to be right, but for the wrong reasons. It turns out roses are more sensitive than a roomful of unpublished poets. Most of ours have turned a sickly yellow-green and are covered with leprous splotches from a disease called rust. So much for pretty. We did a little better with the callalilies. The ones we accidentally planted in the shade are doing great, and the ones we accidentally planted in the sun were barbecued.

The point is, you've got to learn the basics about any plant before sticking it in the soil. Does it suit the sun and soil conditions in that spot? How should the soil be prepared? How often should it be watered and fertilized? Are there any unique environmental conditions to the location, such as high winds, water runoff or meteor showers?

Quiz your nursery person. No question is too dumb. They've heard them all before. Besides, it's in their best interest for you to be a happy planter: if you get frustrated and carpet your yard in Astroturf, they've lost business.

"When I get a beginning gardener, I start them slowly," says John Bauman. "I give them plants that are good confidence builders, that grow well and have some color. They'll usually want the really weird-looking, temperamental ones, but I'll steer them toward what I call 'training plants.' If they do well, I move them on to something else."

Match your landscaping expectations to the amount of time and money you're willing to spend on gardening. Do you want an immaculately manicured English manor garden, or would you be happy just to cover up the bare spots? Plants don't take care of themselves, so do some soul-searching: How much time do you really want to spend on this gardening gig, anyway?

### Great Expectations

Do beginning gardeners have unrealistic expectations? When they stop laughing hysterically, the experts say yes. "Most people want their yards to look like Disneyland, but they don't want to do anything," says Bauman.

Greg Guitare at Bob's Manhattan Beach Nursery has noticed that, too. "The typical customer asks for something that blooms year-round, is easy to grow, never needs any water and doesn't need to be pruned," he says. "I just look up to the sky and say, 'He hasn't created anything like that yet.'"

"I have to convince them that if

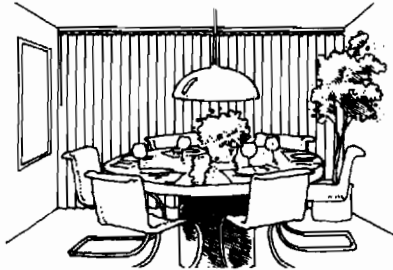
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**"D**rink hardy,  
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Tomorrow  
you sup on malathion."  
I strolled on, filled with  
peace and contentment,  
dodging the craters  
where the rose bushes  
used to be.

they're going to plant, they have to be serious about it. It's going to take some work."

How much work is negotiable. "Low maintenance" is a popular word around nurseries these days, but it has many interpretations. "Some people think low maintenance means no maintenance," says Guitare.

For instance, if you're dying for color, you'll probably pick annuals, flowers that bloom madly but have to be replaced two or three times a year. These are the most prolific, and the biggest pain. Fast-growing plants take more watering, and new growth means you'll be pruning off the old stuff and raking away the remains. And plants that put out a lot of tender young growth tend to attract more insects. You may only want to plant annuals in a few patches.

Perennials are less work. They bloom just once or twice a year, but don't need to be replaced. Evergreens like junipers are easier still—they're basic, hardy plants that seldom flower and don't grow fast. But remember, every plant needs some maintenance—even if you buy silk ones, they'd have to be dusted.

Bauman reports a spurt of interest in growing vegetables. Homegrown ones are tastier, he says, and you know what chemicals they've been doused with, if any. But don't grow them expecting to save money on groceries; when you consider the time and effort you put in, those tastier tomatoes probably cost \$25 a pound.

The experts offer these hints for keeping your garden alive and your sanity intact:

☼ Keep a calendar for recording your gardening activities—when you watered, fertilized, sprayed insecticides, maybe even what you used and how well it worked. That way, you'll stay on schedule and not starve your plants or feed them until their leaves pop off.

☼ Do your gardening duties—feeding, weeding, pruning—regularly, a little bit each weekend, instead of saving them up for a month and making it a chore.

☼ Make regular rounds of your garden with a notebook in hand, inspecting your plants closely and jotting down what you see. "You have to be vigilant," says Romero. "Take inventory of what's going on in your garden—stuff like, 'I have aphids in my hibiscus and thrips in my ficus.' That way, you

can spot problems before they get out of control."

☼ Be prepared, because no matter how conscientious you are, you're going to have to deal with some bugs, plants and weeds. You could be fussier than Howard Hughes, but weed seeds and insect eggs are blowin' in the wind.

☼ As soon as you identify a problem, attack it. Don't wait until that little white web of mildew covers your plant like a parachute; even if you have to take the whole dang plant down to the nursery, find the solution and go for it.

☼ Don't get psyched out. Most problems are fairly easy to solve, if caught early enough. Many stem from the simple act of watering—and more plants die from overwatering than anything else. To tell if your plants are thirsty, dig a finger an inch or so into the earth and see if it's damp. If you don't trust your digit, buy a moisture meter.

☼ And relax. For a nice yard, you don't have to pluck crabgrass out with tweezers or do your own research on pH balances of soil. The local experts are a hang-loose group who recommend simple solutions and a low-intensity outlook. "Gardening is supposed to be relaxing," says Guitare. "It's not supposed to cause you lots of stress and strain. I tell my customers not to worry about a lot of these things. I say, 'What, is the garden club going to show up?'"

A few weeks ago, we had a landscaping plan done. Shortly thereafter, I had another gardening dream. This time, I was leisurely making the rounds of the yard, notebook in hand, and doing a little casual weeding and pruning. Then I noticed the presence of some thrips—tiny insects that suck the juices from plants. "Drink hardy, little vampires," I said ruefully, noting that even thrips play a vital role in nature's grand scheme. "Tomorrow you sup on malathion." I strolled on, filled with peace and contentment, dodging the craters where the rose bushes used to be, my .357 Magnum in hand to chase off nosy garden clubbers.

And when I awoke the next day, most of it was true. Even the petunias were planted right-side up. ●

*Robert Pickard, a Rolling Hills Estates resident, has written for Esquire, Outside and other publications. This is his first gardening article, but we sense a career switch.*