



Bedding plants take thought and care to grow

By ED HUTCHISON
Special to the Record-Eagle

If our growing season was just a bit longer — say, by three weeks — we could take a relaxed approach to choosing and planting bedding plants, be they flowers or vegetables.

That approach would let you try a few different approaches, make some mistakes and still end the season with a great crop of produce and flowers.

While you can — and should — still experiment and learn from mistakes, the short growing season here is not as forgiving as one in a warmer climate.

That said, here are some ideas to help you plan and plant smart: It doesn't matter much where you buy your bedding plants — greenhouse, home center, farmer's market, roadside stand and so on. What matters is the quality of the plant. Freshness and quality of care makes a big difference. If the retail outlet cares for the plants properly — water, sun or shade — from the moment the plants are offloaded to the time they are sold, and assuming fresh stock comes in at least twice weekly, then chances are you will have a nice selection of robust plants. A local greenhouse is more likely to provide the quality care bedding plants need, than is a big home center.



Photo by Ed Hutchison

Choose young plants when shopping for transplants. A flower or two is okay, but most of the plant should consist of foliage.

really big on having the plant in flower or at least bud, when you first see it. The reason is simple: A plant with a flower is more

attractive than one without; besides you can see what it looks like and make more intelligent choices about variety and such. One of the attributes plant breeders work on is the attractiveness of the young plant in the cell pack at retail. While it may be in a plant's genes to bloom at a young age, do look for bedding plants that are not heavily in flower. Better to select and plant a marigold without many or any flowers open than one with two or three blossoms. The younger plant will quickly catch up with the older one. Go for short, bushy plants. Steer clear if their roots are snaking out the bottom of the pack as this

means they have been in the pack too long. Tomato growers can get by with planting early in the season and

protecting plants with various warming devices, but you probably cannot duplicate their efforts with most flowers and vegetables. It is better to wait until the soil has warmed up than to plant a few weeks earlier when the air seems plenty warm. Soil temperature lags behind air temperature. A bedding plant set out in chilly soil will just sit there, doing nothing, until the soil warms up sufficiently for root growth. In this climate, the ideal planting season for bedding plants is roughly May 20 to June 10. You are right — that is a tight planting window. To help roots spread and grow quickly, the soil should be loosened in the top six inches. Till or work it with a shovel only after it has dried from spring frost and rain. Working wet soil can result in a season of clods.

The care the plants get before you plant them can set the stage for the season. If you don't plant them right away, put them outside in a shady area and make sure the soil is kept moist. Even if they are sun-loving plants, keep them a bit sheltered until it is time to plant. Choose a planting day when the sun is not blazing nor the wind blowing. Both conditions drive moisture from the soil and foliage and wilting

can result quickly. Push the plants from the cell pack rather than pulling them out. If you tug too hard, the stem may break from the root ball and the entire plant is lost.

Few people mulch the area around the bedding plants. That's a shame as even a thin (two-inch blanket) holds in moisture and moderates the soil temperature — a good thing for plants with especially sensitive root systems like the wax begonia and impatiens. Mulching also holds down weeds. Shredded bark, chopped up leaves and similar organic material make good mulch for bedding plants. Avoid grass clippings as they often mat to form an impenetrable barrier



Photo by Ed Hutchison

Test for soil moisture before filling or digging by gathering a handful and applying pressure. If it forms a ball that falls apart when pressure is released, the soil is of the right moisture level for working. If the ball remains intact, it is too wet.

for air and water.

Mulching also opens up planting area for shade-loving plants like wax begonias and impatiens. Both can be planted in fairly sunny areas if the soil around the plants is kept cool and moist with a blanket of mulch.

Ed Hutchison is a freelance writer and gardener from Midland, MI.

The right reasons for raised garden beds

By LEE REICH
The Associated Press

Raised beds are all the rage in gardening these days, but you might want to stand your ground before digging in. Raised beds are a lot of work, so stop to consider whether they really are necessary or beneficial.

First realize that we are talking about two things: raised and beds. You cannot have "raised" without beds, but you can have beds without their being raised.

Bed-planting, raised or flat, has much to commend it. Yields are higher because plants can be clustered closer together. The leafy blanket over the soil that results from close planting also shades out weeds and shields the soil from pelting rain and wide swings in temperature.

Raised beds, on the other hand, do have some problems. Mostly, they dry out too quickly. And the higher and narrower they are, the more quickly they dry out. The usual way to make raised beds is by thoroughly churning the soil, but all this digging also destroys valuable humus, disrupts natural air and water channels, and awakens buried weed seeds.

Deep-digging to make a raised bed is justified only where the soil is a very sticky clay, where even weeds cannot thrive. In this case, pile a half-foot depth of sawdust or peat moss on the

soil, sprinkle on some fertilizer and lime, then thoroughly mix everything into the top foot of soil. Form permanent beds with paths, and never again set foot on the beds.

Other justifications for raised beds are where the soil is waterlogged or non-existent (a rocky ledge, for example), or where you want to make a new garden quickly. In these cases, though, no digging is necessary. Begin by mowing any grass or weeds closely. Then lay down a few sheets of newspaper to suppress regrowth and arrange some 6-inch-wide planks on edge for the ends and sides of each bed. Fill the beds with a mix of topsoil, compost, mushroom soil, leafmold, peatmoss, and-or sand, so the resulting soil is rich in organic matter and fertility, and drains well. Fertilizer and lime also might be needed.

Make the beds 3 to 4 feet wide, which is narrow enough so weeding, picking, and harvesting can be done from the paths. Grassed paths are soft

and pretty, but must be edged diligently along beds that are not raised. Alternatively, you can cover paths with wood chips, flagstones, bricks, carpet or anything else that will suppress weeds.

Hauling long lumber

Here's an old carpenter's trick for carrying long lumber in a pickup truck: Cut a 2x6 brace about 1/8th inch longer than the inside width of the truck bed. Wedge it crosswise under the upper lip of the bed about 1 foot behind the cab. Then leave the tailgate up and slide the long boards into the bed and under the 2x6 brace. The brace will hold them down while they rest on the tailgate. Be sure to tack a bright-red or bright-orange flag onto the trailing end of the lumber to alert other drivers.



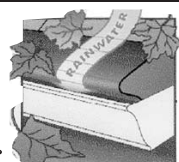
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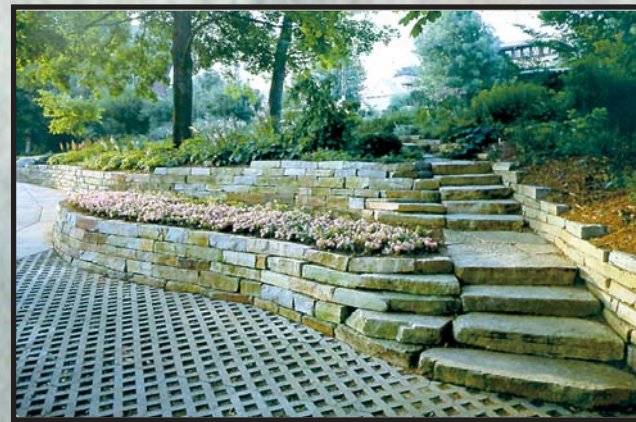
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