



# Gardening techniques that are easy and efficient

By ED HUTCHISON

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Whoever said "It's the little things in life that count" might have been speaking of gardening.

Little things — simple tasks — done at the correct time make all the difference in reducing work and achieving a nice looking lawn or garden, or both.

Take the matter of soil. Work it too early in the spring and you may have hard clods to deal with all summer. Or plant when it is too chilly and seeds may rot and transplants will sit still until the soil warms. Here's a look at little things that make a big difference in gardening, especially early in the planting season.

■ **Soil:** Don't till or work it with a shovel if it is wet, as it often is in early spring as a result of frost leaving the soil mass, melting snow and rain. Test it this way: Scoop up a handful and press your fingers together, applying pressure. Hold the pressure for 10 seconds, then release. If a ball has formed but crumbles when pressure is released, the soil is fine for working. If the ball stays intact when pressure is released, too much moisture remains and the soil should be left to dry for several days. If no ball forms, the soil is dry enough as well — although this may be as much a sign of too much sand in the soil.

■ **Support:** Put support in place early for plants that will need it during their life cycle. Early placement means you won't be damaging the plant or fruits or flowers as they develop later in the season. Among perennials, peonies need staking or tying so the blossom-laden branches stay upright. Place several stakes around the emerging shoots, several inches from the outermost shoot and then loop coarse twine or plant ties around the stakes at several points up and down the stake. Stake or cage tomatoes within three weeks after planting.

Snapdragons present a challenge because they produce flower spikes throughout the season and benefit from support systems that can be adjusted as the plants grow. Stakes and ties work relatively well. Better yet, use rectangular grids that are adjusted on the wire corner posts as the plants grow. The plants grow through the grid. If you can't find these locally, try Gardener's Supply Co., Burlington, Vt. (888-833-

1412 or www.gardeners.com).

■ **Planting seed:** An economical way to get lots of plants and the plants you want rather than only those sold at the garden center. Some seeds come pre-planted, of sorts, on mats that are simply spread out, covered thinly with soil and watered. While more costly than direct sowing, this is a good way to get hard-to-start seeds established because of the nurturing tendency of the mat.

■ **Deadheading:** Impatiens, wax begonias, ageratum, nasturtiums, Alyssum and several other annuals used in massed plantings drop spent blossoms as a matter of course. Others do not and their wilted flowers should be removed on a regular basis to ensure flowering all season long.

Marigolds, zinnias, calendulas, salvia, nicotiana, cosmos, snapdragons and strawflowers are among the annuals that need your help in removing spent blossoms that would otherwise go to seed and by doing so, reduce the number of flowers that will be produced.

Most perennials should be deadheaded as well. Ditto for the large-leaf Rhododendron (R. catawbiense). Remove spent rhododendron flowers by snapping off the cluster at the point where new leaves are emerging. Do this soon after flowers wilt, which is usually mid May.

■ **Fertilizing:** The growing season for annual flowers and vegetables in most parts of the country is a short 16 to 18 weeks. Working time-release granular

Photo by Ed Hutchison

Pre-planted mats provide one alternative to starting vegetable, herb and flower seeds.

fertilizer into the soil before planting provides season-long availability of nutrients for the plant. Or, you can add nutrients with spray-on fertilizers like Miracle Gro, Peter's and several other national brands. Fertilize monthly, beginning about two weeks after garden plants are first set out. Or, choose the once-a-season method by working time-release fertilizer that you work into the soil before planting.

■ **Tender care:** The first three weeks in the life of a seedling or just planted transplant set the stage for the rest of the season. The most important thing you can do is make sure the young plant does not dry out during this period. While watering every day or two will probably resolve this challenge, a two-inch blanket of mulch around the plant will hold in moisture, warmth and set up a friendly environment for the transplant or seedling.

Ed Hutchison is a freelance writer and gardener who lives in Midland, MI.

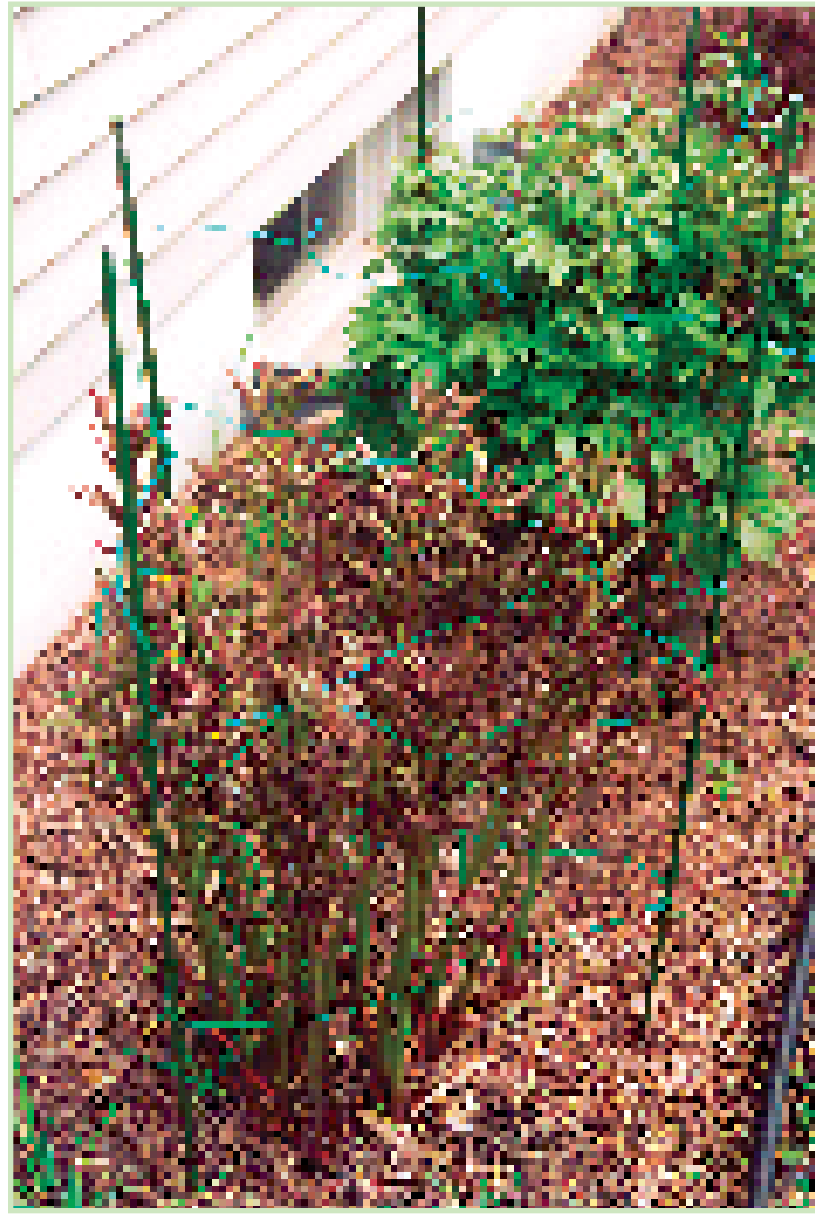


Photo by Ed Hutchison

Peonies benefit from staking before leaves are fully developed.



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