

Include pathways through your garden that allow you to reach all of your plants without walking on the soil. This avoids compressing the soil around the roots, and helps to maintain good airspace.

General Tips

Water your plants or seedlings until they are well established. Water early in the day and avoid splashing water on leaves as this may encourage disease. Using soaker hoses or drip irrigation systems is a better option than using a hose or a sprinkler to avoid splashing. As a rule of thumb, make sure plants receive an inch of water a week.

Use a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch around your plants to keep the soil from drying out too quickly and to help discourage weeds. Keep the mulch away from the stem of the plant. Piling mulch there can lead to stem rot, and actually make it more difficult for water to reach the roots.

Keep weeds pulled, and remove spent flowers (deadhead) before they form seed heads, but don't deadhead flowers if you plan to dry them or get seeds from them.

Keep one eye open for insects and diseases, and be sure you've identified the cause of any problem before you begin treating it. Use the least toxic method as your first step.

If you have a question about any gardening problem or procedure, call the Penn State Extension Office. We'll be happy to answer your questions.

Happy gardening!

One in a series of informational brochures produced by the Penn State Extension Master Gardeners Chester County, sponsored by Penn State University's Cooperative Extension. Penn State Extension Master Gardeners are volunteers who educate the public on best practices in consumer horticulture and environmental stewardship. They receive horticultural training from Penn State University's College of Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension.

For answers on any home gardening issue, call the Master Gardener Hotline at 610-696-3500 or email chestermg@psu.edu.

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Planting Flowers

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Where Do I Start?

For many fledgling gardeners, planting means digging a hole, inserting a flower, vegetable seedling, or seed, and tamping it into the soil. There's more to it than that, and here are the additional steps experienced gardeners take to grow healthy, happy plants.

Let's start with replanting potted plants (annual and perennial flowers grown in individual containers for purchase) from their individual pots to the garden. Some plants come as field-grown bare-root plants, which are grown without pots, harvested when dormant, and stored without soil. When they arrive they may look dead, but they are just dormant and will begin vigorous root growth when they have been planted, watered, and the temperature and day length are right.

First Things First

Before you begin choosing plants, you should know:

The characteristics of your soil from a soil test. Plants thrive in relation to the soil that supports them. So before planting, do a soil test (available from your Extension office), amend (fortify) the soil with fertilizers or additives as recommended by the soil test, and add organic matter (particularly if your soil is clay, as most of Chester County is).

Your planting zone, which is an indication of average climate conditions, first and last frost dates, and range of temperatures in your area. Most of Chester County is in Zone 6(b), and Chester County residents can safely begin to plant about May 15 (after the last frost). Be prepared, though, to cover plants, as a sudden freeze is still possible.

A planting scheme or plot design that will give you an idea of colors, heights, and space the plants will use.

Preparation for Planting

If plants were shipped to you, it is best to plant them as soon after arrival as possible. When the shipment arrives, open the carton and allow air to circulate around the plants. While getting ready to plant, place the open carton in a cool, shady spot.

Water potted plants thoroughly before planting. Bare-root plants should be soaked in water for an hour or two immediately before planting.

Prepare plant labels, especially for plants that do not have flowers at the time of planting.

OK, Let's Plant!

The best time to plant is when it is cool and overcast. Planting in late afternoon or evening will give the plant all night to recover.

The plant hole should be somewhat larger than the soil ball, or big enough to spread out the roots of a bare-root plant, and deep enough to place the top of the soil ball level with the ground. Bare-root plants usually come with directions for planting depth. The hole can be dug by hand with a trowel, spade, or planting fork; or with a rotary tiller, if you choose.

When removing plants from containers, check the roots to be sure the plant is not pot-bound. The roots of a pot-bound plant begin to circle around inside of the pot and once they circle, they usually will continue to do so until they choke the plant, which leads to an early demise. The quickest way to solve the problem is to slice through the roots with a sharp knife, but you can also tease the roots loose with your fingers.

It's okay for the soil to drop off as you loosen the roots – it makes it easier to spread the roots out in the hole.

If the plants are in peat pots and the roots have grown through them, cut the bottoms, remove the collar of the pot, and remove as much of the pot sides as possible to make it easier for the plant to grow. Those pieces can be added to the soil, as they will decompose and add organic matter in the process.

For bare-root plants, make a mound in the center of the hole, and spread the roots out over the mound.

When you place the plant in the hole, be sure to spread the roots to encourage them to grow outward. Fill the hole and firm the soil around it, but do not tamp heavily. Keep the soil light so air and water can travel through the soil easily. Use light pressure around the stem to ensure the plant's stability, then water thoroughly. After they have adjusted to their new home, plants can be fed with whatever fertilizer you choose to use.

A Few Thoughts on Design

Your garden can be straight or curved, but a plot that curves gently will add interest and depth.

Plants placed in groups (usually in odd numbers) are more striking than individual plants, and plants of various heights help create a garden with balance and rhythm.

In formal beds, gardeners achieve balance by creating a mirror image. For an informal garden, vary your plantings. Some designers recommend sticking with two or three colors, repeating groups of colors or plants to create a rhythm, or a sense of continuity.