

Putting Your Plants to Bed

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When you mow your lawn, do you find yourself spending half the time mowing around things? Things like trees, shrubs, lawn furniture, or decks? If so, you're not alone. Many of us have plenty of obstacles in our lawns when we mow. But there is something we can do to make our maintenance a little easier.

Grouping plants, or even other objects in the landscape such as lawn furniture, makes mowing and other maintenance easier and safer. There's less stopping, backing up, and turning when you're mowing if you don't have individual plants scattered throughout the lawn. Watering is also easier and more efficient if plants with similar water requirements are grouped together. You can use a very efficient low-volume or micro-irrigation system in the beds of shrubs or flowers. You can limit the use of the more traditional and inefficient lawn sprinklers to the lawn area, knowing that the stream of water won't be blocked by trees or shrubs.



Learn to think of your lawn as a bed in itself, composed of millions of grass plants. Generally lawns don't mix that well with shrubs or trees anyway. Lawn grass will inhibit the growth of small trees and shrubs by competing with them for water and nutrients. And large trees will inhibit the growth of grass by competing for moisture and by shading the grass. Weedeaters, often used to trim grass around trees, can cause serious injury to young tree trunks, serving as entry points for disease organisms. So, as much as possible, keep your trees and your lawn in separate beds.

So how do you create beds in your landscape? If you are starting from scratch with a new landscape, it's easy. You simply start with the existing vegetation and structures and group areas of the landscape into areas of use. For example, there may be the front entrance area, the backyard play area, or the flower garden area. It's usually best to do this planning on paper. With the existing features drawn on a plan, you then can play with designs on paper to tie the landscape areas together.

Keep bed lines simple. They don't have to be straight or boring. But don't contrive unnatural curves. Not only will the curves look contrived. Too many little squiggles in the bed lines will make maintenance more difficult. Large sweeping curves generally look better and are easier to mow and maintain.

The same principles apply if you have an existing landscape and want to tie areas together into beds. Group plantings by function and by maintenance requirements. Use lines to tie the plantings together into beds. Some bed lines will almost be defined for you, such as in the case of a area of trees where grass doesn't grow. The shade from the trees will define the edge of the lawn bed.

Many methods of edging beds can be used, such as using brick, concrete, or wood. But, beds don't necessarily have to have formal edging. Edging is most often used to define the edge of the lawn bed with an adjacent planting, such as a shrub bed or a groundcover bed. But if the plants in the adjacent bed are fairly aggressive in growth, you may need no edging to keep the border reasonably defined with an occasional touchup from the mechanical edger or weedeater. If you follow label

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directions carefully, you can even use a herbicide such as Finale.

A word of caution on beds... be careful, or you may create a monster if you create too many beds or beds that are too large. You could look at your landscape as something like an investment portfolio. Though it's good to group your plantings into beds, you still want to diversify the beds somewhat, because each type of planting will have its own special maintenance needs, whether it be lawn or groundcover bed.

Lawns have to be mowed, weekly for about half the year here. Wooded areas always have limbs falling and underbrush sprouting. Some of the underbrush is desirable, some of it's not. Most flower beds require regular grooming and some replanting, whether they be annuals or perennials. Groundcover beds occasionally need to be cut back and cleaned of leaves and other debris. This past winter's heavy acorn crop also resulted in oaks sprouting by the thousands in groundcover beds.

So create your landscape beds to reduce the maintenance caused by having scattered plantings. But be careful not to overdo it.

For more information on gardening in our area (zone 8B; Southern Living's "Costal Zone"), visit the University of Florida IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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