

What I wish I knew before I Started Landscaping

Linda H. Yates

Sunday, November 24, 2002

"No individual ever completely masters gardening," television personality and author Jim Wilson writes in *The Victory Garden*, a 894 page encyclopedic guide for both amateur and serious gardeners. "One revelation leads to another in a lifelong journey of discovery," he points out.

Some of the revelations I've slowly received during years of gardening include what seemed like good ideas at the time but clearly were recognized as mistakes later. Other revelations came after knowledge was gained from other gardeners, lessons were learned from successes and failures, and I learned to adapt gardening to the climate and soil conditions here.

Our family built a home on what had once been a cornfield. When we moved in, numerous four to six feet tall pine seedlings were the only greenery left on the landscape. Foundation plantings were added around the house and the forty or more young trees reigned supreme in the back and side yards. MIS-TAKE!

Now years later, the trees are sixty or more feet tall, enveloping the landscape in shade, pinecones, pinestraw, and storm-tossed limbs. Many have been cut over the years at a cost of \$400 to \$600 each as they became damaged by pine beetles. A few pine trees would have been nice in the landscape, placed a safe distance from the house, and providing shade for azaleas and dogwood trees and a never-ending supply of pinestraw for mulching.

Another tree praised for its leafy spread in summer and nice color in the fall, the sweet gum, has become a nuisance. Hundreds of sweet gum seedlings came up in beds and paths this summer after a prolific crop of sweet gum balls last fall. Too late I learned that a sterile variety of this tree that produces no seeds is available.

Sago palms are to be cherished, right? What great accents they add to the landscape! But planting them near a pine tree makes them a catch basin for pinestraw.

Avid gardeners are eager to be the first to grow a garden-ripe tomato. As soon as the plants were on sale at the nurseries, too many times I joined the eager crowd who bought them and set them out in the cool soils of early spring. I covered them on chilly nights with overturned flower pots. They survived but did not grow an inch until soil temperatures reached the required 70 to 80 degrees and air temperatures ranged from 60 to 85 degrees a month later.

When summer annuals struggle to produce a final bloom even though a hot sun continues in October, we eager gardeners rush to the garden center for pansies to replace them. We water the new plants every day, and the sun shines hot every day. The pansies die one by one. Maybe in November or December we'll buy some more of these cool weather plants.

Gardeners love to share plants. Usually the ones shared grow beautifully in our climate. Soon they cover many feet of our gardens and we in turn give them to friends. After a few years,

What I wish I knew before I Started Landscaping

much of of the landscape is covered with plants that self-seed or reproduce by underground root systems. A foolhardy gardener loves every blossom that grows; a well-seasoned gardener learns to pull out the thugs after a few seasons.

Disciplined landscapers refuse to plant anything that is invasive. Every plant, tree or shrub must occupy the spot assigned to it and no more! I have been slow to join this group. I confess there are some "invasives" or "aggressives" that I love enough to weed out their unwanted seedlings as necessary -- the goldenrain tree, nandina, ginger lilies, garden phlox, to list a few. But long gone is the Chinese tallow tree once I learned that birds distribute its seeds to crowd out native trees. Gone is the ivy, and just this fall, the unobedient obedient plant ended its tenure. Such is the nature of landscaping revelations. Learning about new plants, their growth habits, and how they fit into my garden is both a challenge and a thrill. Lessons I have learned along the way make it easier and more satisfying. And I know I'll never quit learning.



Linda H. Yates is a Master Gardener volunteer with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County and a member of its Horticultural Advisory Committee. Photo of goldenrain trees and pines by Linda Yates.

[\[Back\]](#)