

It's the Simple Things That Cause Most Plant Problems



Photo by David W. Marshall: Purple coneflowers.jpg Most plant problems are caused by lack of attention to proper light, water, or soil conditions.

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April 10, 2005

Do you ever have problems with plants in your landscape and garden? Yes, there are plenty of pests such as insects and diseases that can cause problems. But having spent almost thirty years trying to help people with plant problems, I can tell you that the causes of most of the plant problems are fairly basic and simple.

Watering improperly, for example, causes many plant failures. When new plants are added to the landscape, they have a root system limited to the size of the container in which they were growing before being transplanted. That little root system dries out quickly, even after it is placed in the ground. So, it is important to water fairly frequently at first. But even more important is where you apply the water. If the plant was growing in a one-gallon container, the water must be applied within just a couple inches of the stem of the plant so that it will run down into the limited root system. This is drastically different than watering an established plant which may have roots extending out three times the branch spread of the plant. But when the plants are recently transplanted from pots, watering out beyond the rootball of the plant does no good. In fact, it's false security if you think you're watering the young plant but merely watering the soil beyond the roots. The water must be directed at the rootball. If the rootball ever dries out completely, it's like trying to rewet a dry sponge.

Watering is not so critical to older, established plants in the landscape. In fact, some problems are caused by people watering too much. But, when we have a prolonged period without rain, such as we had late this summer, then even established plants may need watering. As Jody Walthall said in his column here last week, these established plants won't need watering often. They probably only need one good soaking during the drought. But that one good soaking could prevent us from losing some of the weaker or stressed plants. This is especially true if there are additional stresses to the plants. For example, a lawn not receiving rainfall is under

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stress. But it receives an additional stress when you mow it closely. And it receives yet an additional stress when the kids go out and play football on it.

Another common cause of plant problems is planting too deeply. Never plant a shrub, tree, or flower more deeply than it was growing in the container. In fact, it's best to set it even a little higher than it was growing in the container, because it usually will settle a little. If the stem is covered deeper than it was originally planted, it may start rotting. Also, some of the roots will die as they're not receiving adequate oxygen.

I've recently observed that many people kill plants by overfertilizing. Fertilizer is a salt. Having the salt touch the plant leaves or stem, or even having a little concentrated pile of the fertilizer salts over the plant roots, will burn the plant. If the plant is a young tender flower plant, it will probably even die, especially if it doesn't receive enough water after the fertilizer application. When you're fertilizing young flower plants, you need no more than a teaspoon of fertilizer per plant. And the fertilizer cannot be dumped in a pile. You want to spread it so thinly you almost don't even see it on the soil surface. When you're fertilizing larger shrubs, you can figure on using only about a tablespoon of fertilizer per foot of plant height. Always err on the side of too little. Remember, too much fertilizer can kill your plants.

Every summer, there are probably hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted in Tallahassee by people laying sod in areas that are too shaded. They want to blame the sod dealer. But, it's a simple fact that grass, even St. Augustine grass, requires a fair amount of sunlight. If you wish to grow grass in a spot that's questionable in terms of sunlight received, why not plant some grass plugs first and see how well they spread? It's a lot less expensive than gambling with hundreds of dollars worth of sod. If the plugs don't work, the sod is even less likely to work. After all, it has a much more shallow root system than do the grass plugs.

So, next time you're trying to figure out why a certain plant isn't doing so well, don't forget to take a look at the basics. Most problems are related to basics of either sunlight, water, or oxygen.

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