KEYS TO SUCCESS WITH YOUR NEW LANDSCAPE PLANTS

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: The first key to success with plants is picking the right plant for the right spot, such as this Sanchezia nobilis for a spot that receives light morning sun and afternoon shade.

Deborah Lawson is a Certified Master Gardener with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/ She is also owner of Rejuvenation LLC, landscaping and design.

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You can tell by the flurry of activity at every local nursery and garden center, it’s that time of year when everyone gets the fever to spruce up their yard. Many of you are buying new plants now. If you narrow it down to the simplest layman’s terms, plants need three things to survive… the proper amount of light, the proper amount of oxygen, and the proper amount of water. They are really a lot like us.

The first principle of the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program is “right plant, right place.” Is the location for the plant compatible with its needs? Think about sunlight requirements, but also think about water? For example, if you don’t have gutters to direct the flow from a hard rain, avoid planting directly under the drip line of your house where your new plants may get beaten down by a hard rain or roots may rot from continual soaking during the rainy season.

Make sure to buy the right plant at the right time of year. Sometimes national chain stores sell annuals this time of year that are really winter plants in this climate. Snapdragons, pansies and many types of petunias are cool-season flowers in Tallahassee and will not last through June. If you are looking for a summer petunia, make sure it is a ‘Wave’ type or one of the other heat-tolerant petunias. And buy other annuals that can withstand our intense summers.
Remember that nurseries water their plants every day. The potting mixture they use is intended to drain well and will dry out quickly. Transplant your new plants as quickly as possible after you purchase them. If you are not going to plant them right away, make sure they are kept in a place with the right amount of light and watered daily.

Don’t buy plants that are root-bound. These are last year’s plants that didn’t sell and should have been transplanted to larger containers. The roots may be growing out of the holes at the bottom and you might think, “Wow, this is a healthy plant.” When you get it home you find not much soil in the pot and roots that have grown in a tight circular pattern that is impossible to untangle. It is going to be harder for this plant to transplant successfully. Either return the plant or do your best to loosen the roots from their circular tangle so that it will have a decent chance at survival.

Don’t over-fertilize your new plant. It doesn’t need any fertilizer right away, and putting fertilizer in the hole can burn the roots.

Don’t plant a new shrub or tree too deep in the ground. The most up-to-date research shows that trees and shrubs actually do better when the roots can get more oxygen and should be planted with the top of the rootball ten percent above the landscape soil.

Here’s the biggie, PROPER WATERING of your new landscape plants. Improper watering is a primary reason for plant failure. These plants need more of your attention. If you don’t have the time to water them properly, consider installing micro-irrigation and a timer to do the job for you. It is easy to install and inexpensive when you consider the money you spend on the plants themselves. New trees and shrubs have small root systems which dry out quickly. A good guideline for trees and shrubs is to water every other day for the first four months and then weekly until established. Below are some guidelines for trees that may help you gauge watering needs for your plants:

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<tr>
<th>Diameter of Tree in Inches</th>
<th>Approximate Height in Feet</th>
<th>Gallons Per Watering</th>
<th>Establishment Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
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Established plants that have been planted in the right place should be able to survive on rainfall unless we experience severe drought as we have over the past year. Under drought conditions even established plants need supplemental watering.

All plants benefit greatly from being properly mulched. This is the fourth principle of the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program. Mulch will help moderate your soil.
temperature, retain moisture, and inhibit weeds. An organic mulch such as pine straw or woodchips decomposes and improves the soil’s fertility.

The watering requirements for your newly planted landscape plants are vastly different than the watering needs of your established trees and shrubs, which again, are vastly different than the watering needs your lawn. For more information, or if you want to learn more about having a Florida-Friendly Landscape, go to http://FloridaYards.org

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