Newcomers to Tallahassee quickly work their way through the sometimes tough but exciting first days of settling into a new home, starting a new job, locating schools, churches, stores and physicians.

When spring arrived last month and a profusion of flowering trees and shrubs brightened every street, newcomers couldn’t help but be struck by the beauty of the city. The red, pink and white blossoms in their neighbor’s yard may have looked a little like the peonies they grew in the North or the tropical hibiscus they saw in South Florida. But, no, these flowering plants were shrubs and trees with unfamiliar names.

Love of flowers and gardening moves with people wherever they go. But the way one gardens changes zone by zone. Here in USDA plant hardiness zones 8b and 9a, gardeners enjoy two or three growing seasons, each different, each suitable to different types of plants. When Tallahassee’s heat and humidity are combined with the life cycle of insects, less rainfall, and soil that varies from location to location, new gardening skills and "the way we do it here" must be learned.

An abundance of help is available. Gardening information adapted and tested for this area by the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Service can be found on a computer at http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn_and_garden/index.shtml There one will find lists of plants and trees suitable for this climate and conditions, and what fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation practices and environmental precautions are recommended.
The Extension Service at 615 Paul Russell Road also has a demonstration garden, planted and maintained by Master Gardener volunteers, where one can see what plants do well here and in which season they bloom.

Local plant nurseries and garden centers have knowledgeable employees who will answer your questions and tell you the ultimate height and spread of a tree or shrub you are considering, what annuals and perennials will bloom in each season and whether they require sun, part shade or full shade.

Visit public gardens such as Maclay Gardens State Park and Goodwood. Take a walk through Tallahassee’s parks, and check out native flowering trees and wild flowers that grow in the woods and along the highways. If these thrive where they are unattended, they will thrive in your yard as long as soil conditions and sun/shade ratio are similar.

Talk with neighbors and friends whose gardens you admire. You will find they all love to tell about their plants and may even share a few of them with you.

As you get started, nothing can dampen your enthusiasm more quickly than poor soil conditions. Some plants actually prefer dry soil, some will grow in a bog, but most like moist, well-drained soil. Local soils are not bad and with some preparation can be improved. To help identify its properties, get your soil tested. The Leon County Extension Service has instructions on how to take samples and bags to put them in for mailing to the lab at the University of Florida. A complete analysis will be provided.

The physical condition of garden soils can be improved by adding organic matter. Till or dig in compost, humus, peat moss, shredded pine bark or manure, or grow cover crops in the fall that can be tilled in next spring. These additives will make sandy soils hold moisture and nutrients better and heavy clay soils easier to work. Plant growth will be enhanced, excess moisture will drain better and the oxygen supply essential to plant roots will be increased.

If you are starting with a bare landscape, trees are the first priority. Not only are they a visual asset. They will increase the value of your property, provide shade that helps cool your house in the summer and make time spent outside more pleasant. Check the list of trees best for this area on the Leon County UF Extension webpages.

Forget the fescue lawn you may have previously enjoyed. Here the most frequently planted lawns are centipede and St. Augustine. If the lawn is partly shaded, types of St. Augustine such as ‘Seville’ or ‘Bitter Blue’ are your only option. For very shady conditions and under trees, do not plant grass at all. Use a groundcover or mulch. Use mulches such as pine straw, pine bark and leaves in flowerbeds and around shrubbery to conserve moisture and discourage weeds.

Gardening is a life-long learning process. It will be a rewarding experience here in your new home once you get the hang of it. Welcome to the neighborhood!

###