Tallahassee Gardening 101

Many plants can be grown in Tallahassee, from native perennial plants such as cross vine (Bignonia capreolata), to tropicaals such as variegated tapioca (Manihot esculenta), which may be annual or perennial, depending on the severity of the winter and the microclimate in which the plan is growing.

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If you’re new to the Tallahassee area or just new to gardening, this article contains basic practical information for you.

Tallahassee falls into United States Department of Agriculture Zone 8B, which is the lower South. Plant zones must be considered since temperatures can get quite cold here in winter, and the summers are long, hot and humid, and rain is typically plentiful. Zone 8B will experience average annual minimum temperatures of 15 to 20 degrees. Gardeners must also consider other factors including soil pH, elevation, wind, sun exposure, humidity, soil drainage and even deer and rabbit resistance.

Soil here often contains adequate phosphorus, so the recommended makeup of fertilizer for our area is 15-0-15 (15% nitrogen (N), 0% phosphorus (P), and 15% potassium (K)). Look for a product that lists 1/3 to 1/2 of the nitrogen in slow-release form so it will be available to the plant for a longer period of time.

It is advisable to have a soil test before you add nutrients to your garden and start selecting plants. Most plants prefer neutral or slightly acidic soil, but lime or sulfur can be used to raise or lower pH. If you discover that your soil is somewhat acidic, you may wish to consider plants like blueberries, hydrangeas and camellias, which prefer an acidic soil. Soil test kits are free from the Leon County Extension office at 615 Paul Russell Road in Tallahassee. Follow the instructions carefully. Consider taking several samples from different areas of the landscape like flower beds and vegetable gardens. The cost for these tests is minimal. If soil drainage is a problem, organic matter and/or sand can be added to improve drainage, or you may want to think about installing a rain garden in a wet area.
Most gardeners often end up with some invasive exotic plants in their landscapes. Sometimes they are planted on purpose, passed along by other well meaning gardeners. Some are even still available commercially. But many times wildlife, such as birds or raccoons spread these plants from yard to yard. Plants to avoid are air potato, Chinese tallow tree, kudzu, Japanese climbing fern, bush morning glory, cogon grass, nandina, wild taro, coral ardesia, Chinese privet, camphor trees, mimosa, Japanese honeysuckle, wisteria, and silverthorn. While some of these plants are very attractive, they spread rapidly and are all but impossible to eradicate. For photos and more about these invasive plants visit: http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/landscaping/invasive_exotic_plants.html

The most important factor in successful gardening is choosing the right plant for the site. If you consider plant zone, sun exposure, drainage, soil pH and plant size at maturity you greatly increase your chances of success and maximize your gardening dollars. Also, be sure to choose healthy plants that are not root bound. Root bound plants may survive for a while but will never thrive. Consider using native varieties which are naturally adapted to local conditions. Some Tallahassee natives are: red maple (Acer rubrum), red buckeye (Aesculus pavia), river birch (Betula nigra), cross vine (Bignonia capreolata), American beautyberry (Callicarpa americana), redbud (Cercis canadensis), flowering dogwood (Cornus florida), titi (Cyrilla racemiflora) and many, many others. The Florida Native Plants Society provides an extensive list on its website which is arranged by county. See http://www.fnps.org/. Camellias, azaleas, crape myrtles, hydrangeas, daylilies, and many other nonnative perennial species also thrive here and have become a permanent part of the Tallahassee landscape. Many tropica can be grown successfully as well, thriving in our hot summers, although winter weather may cause them to perform as annuals here.

There are many resources available for the home gardener. The local extension office can provide publications as well as telephone advice from the Master Gardener desk at (850) 606-5602. There is a wealth of information available through the website http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn_and_garden/index.shtml Local libraries, nurseries, garden clubs and groups are other good sources of information. Use caution in gathering internet information; advice that may be sound in northern Alabama is not likely to be as much help here. Remember the difference in plant zones.

A final bit of advice that I hear over and over from master gardeners is that if a plant doesn’t do well in your yard, pull it out and try something else. For most of us there is some trial and error involved but that’s just part of the fun.

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