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The Vine Line

Greetings to all,

I would like to open by saying a big "Thank You" to everyone who has participated in our Online Plant Sale. It has a new learning experience for our staff, and it certainly exceeded our expectations as far as the response we have received from you, our customers. We have focused on plants that we have grown, primarily perennials, but also have a selection of shrubs, a few trees, some uncommon annuals, herbs and vegetables. I really missed being able to visit with fellow gardeners in person, but I have answered many questions over the phone and by email. We will be keeping the Online Nursery open until Memorial Day, so you still have a chance to purchase more plants or give us a try for the first time. Some plants that were not ready for the sale at the time we started will become available soon. One of these items are Caladium Bulbs, which can be planted directly in the ground at this time of year.



Another positive about our Plant Sale this year is that we are selling some plants from our neighbor across Park Avenue, The Dixon. They will not be having their sale this year so I hope you will help support both them and us by purchasing some of their plants at our sale.

Paul Little, is also well known by Memphis area gardeners. We are selling a great selection of his "Southern Select" sedums and other succulents as well as some of his unique planted containers. This is the only venue where Paul's plants will be available this spring.

The month of May is the prime time to plant annual flowers in beds as well as outdoor containers and hanging baskets. Selecting the right plants for the right spot is the number one priority. Almost any plant you purchase anywhere has a tag with both the common and botanical name as well as a little cultural information including if it will grow in the sun or shade. This is really important information, especially to beginning gardeners or for a gardener who is growing something new to them. A plant that needs a sunny spot will only be a shadow of what it could be, if planted in shade and if it flowers at all, it will be sparse. A shade loving plant in a sunny location will usually wilt in the heat of the day, end up having brown edges to it's foliage and eventually die. Please don't participate in plant torture, read the information on the care tags.

The second most important part of planting annuals or perennials is soil preparation. Chiseling a small plant into hard soil is a sure way for it not to succeed. Most flower beds should be tilled, just like you were planting a vegetable garden. Work in organic matter such as soil conditioner or compost and an appropriate fertilizer for the species you will be planting. Remember most plants do not want to be planted deeper than the depth that they had been growing in the container. There are a few exceptions, tomatoes being one of them, but as a general rule do not plant deep.

Mulch is another consideration. It does help to keep the soil moist and it does prevent some weed seeds from germinating, but remember all things in nature should be in moderation. Too much mulch and you will smother your plants. One to one and a half inches of mulch is plenty. It needs to be organic matter that will eventually decompose and add to the soil. It needs to be replaced every year. Some of the colored "Designer Mulches" that come in red, black and others colors are made of ground up pallets and last forever---not environmentally sound ! There are a number of good quality mulches commercially available. My first choice is double hammer milled hardwood.

When planting containers always use a potting soil, never garden soil which is too heavy and drains very slowly. All containers should have at least one or more drainage holes at the bottom. You can cover this with a flat stone or a piece of broken clay pot to prevent the soil from washing out. With really large containers I would put something under them to keep the drainage hole from being sealed off by the flat surface under it. Three or four pieces of broken tile or something similar, under a large pot will not be visible, but will allow it to drain. Finally, never put a pot directly on soil. It just doesn't look right, If you chose to put a pot directly on the ground, my question is ---- why didn't you just improve the soil and plant something there? Remember planted outdoor containers of any kind need regular watering. When placing them be sure they are conveniently close to a source of water. It is essential!

So far this spring, we have had more than enough rain. This is good in that only new plantings need any supplemental watering. On the other hand it makes it difficult to do soil preparation because there have been very few windows of opportunity when the ground was not too wet to work. We are hoping to start planting our annual color plantings over the next couple of weeks so that grounds look good when we are able to reopen to the public

After all these April showers, I wish you all lots of May flowers!



Director of Horticulture at MBG

Trees and Water: Let Nature Take its Course?

Trees require two main factors for a healthy life: water and sunlight. Of course, this is an over-simplification, but a comprehensive list of requirements might prove overwhelming for anyone seeking to plant and care for a tree. Fortunately, the soil in which a tree is planted contains the assortment of nutrients necessary for life, which can be absorbed by the tree's root system. As for water and sunlight, nature has that taken care of as well. The sun inundates the planet with sunlight every single day, which is passively absorbed by the tree's leaves. Rainfall, as we know can be a bit less predictable, is consistent enough to satisfy the needs of trees that are found here naturally. It is suspiciously convenient on the surface, but a simple walk in an undisturbed forest reveals the true nature of the system. These areas are not irrigated artificially, and yet trees and other plant life appear to be thriving wonderfully within a naturally balanced system. How do we recreate this

balance in a landscaped setting, to ensure healthy trees? How much do we actually need to water our trees?

For the most part, if your soil is healthy, you have planted a tree that is found naturally in this area, your site mimics the types of sites where that species is found, and you are satisfying the tree's sunlight requirements, you don't need to do much to ensure the health of your tree. "Right tree right place" takes all these restrictions into consideration. Doing research on the front end will only help you down the road. Nature is going to do most of the work for you in these cases. However, it is beneficial to understand the differences between planted and naturally occurring trees to know when we should intervene.

Planting a tree in your front yard is not "natural" *per se*, as trees self-propagate in nature. Planted trees may require much more care and attention than one that has propagated naturally. Think for a moment of a sapling growing in the forest. Through

selective processes, nature dictates what trees are found where, such that each mature tree you encounter on a hike through the wilderness may represent one successful attempt out of 10,000 attempts at growth. Every factor within this microhabitat is working synergistically to contribute to a successful tree. In our landscapes and yards, rainfall (or lack thereof) can have a more pronounced effect because the tree no longer has the buffer of the forest. For example, a tree growing in a landscape may be more prone to heat and wind than one growing within a forest, making the tree more susceptible to drought stress. In this situation, intervening and watering your trees may be the right call.

The type of irrigation you use for your trees is also something to be considered. Tree roots will grow where there is available air and moisture. If you have a light sprinkler system set up for your trees, ensure that the water is running long enough to penetrate deeply within the soil. Otherwise, the tree roots will grow more closely to the surface, which will make them more vulnerable to desiccation. Infrequent "soaks" done in the early morning will encourage deep and healthy root growth. It is also best to water the entire drip line of the tree, to ensure even distribution of water across the entire root system, if possible. In our richly clay soil, it can be beneficial to allow ample time between soaks. This will cause the soil particles to move, swelling and shrinking, creating pore space and allowing more room for root growth. If you wish to install an underground irrigation system around existing trees, be careful with how you dig trenches for irrigation pipes. Cutting straight across the tree's roots may be a more direct line to your target but circumventing the drip line will ensure a healthier tree by minimizing damage to the root system.

All in all, nature has done the task of providing trees with everything that they need for millennia. Now that we have removed trees from their natural setting and placed them in our landscapes, we must ensure their continued success by providing them with what they may be lacking as a result of the change in habitat. Water is certainly a precious resource although certain trees are more capable than others at handling periods of drought. Be sure to choose the right tree that fits your area and watering capabilities.

By Bo Kelley, MBG Arborist



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Something you want to see or learn more about? Email our Horticulture Director rick.pudwell@memphisbotanicgarden.com.

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