

NO DIG: MAKE A GARDEN TODAY. . . with paper and mulch. It will give you more enjoyment and can be done anytime, anywhere with little effort of your part! All it needs is more mulch on top.

MORE ENJOYMENT FROM YOUR YARD

People here, around I-77 and I-40, grow everything -- flowers, food, trees and shrubs -- you name it. Quality can be so gratifying. For some there's the challenge of less common (and even more expensive) fruits, vegetables, plants or seeds. A garden is really a very personal thing -- not only how much time, effort and money one's willing to put into it; but what YOU expect/need/want from your yard. We want the very best. That's why we go "natural." So laid out here are garden topics, alphabetically ordered, and waiting for your input, so let us know:

BACKYARDS are known for vast nothingness -- a good place for trees, shrubs and gardens of all sorts, but especially the taller plants. In fact, you'll want the tallest at the lot line in back. No sense wasting other spaces on the tallest of plants -- for now's a good time to check out the sun -- one certainly does not want to shade other growing things with those tall plants.

COMBOS The vegetable garden has traditionally been located in an area separate from other parts of the landscape; probably because it was considered unsightly. Or, it needed more sun. With proper planning, however, the garden can be both functional and attractive. Or as our Sunday paper once said, "interplant flowers with veggies to boost eye appeal." Landscape designers today often incorporate the home landscape with other more ornamental plants such as flowering annuals in the vegetable garden, and vice versa -- have you thought about including one of the following (let us know about it:)

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Edible garden | Herb garden |
| Sensory gardens for sitting and smelling (fragrance) | Flower garden |
| Fairy, gnome or spirit gardens | Meadow-like garden |
| Railroad garden | Bog & Swamp gardens |
| Butterfly, bee or bird gardens | Wildflower garden |
| Night garden | Forest Floor garden |
| Mono color garden -- all white, all red, etc. | Wildlife garden |
| Water garden | Native Plant garden |
| Hummingbird garden | Historical Garden |

And what about weeds? In order to cut down on weeds, save moisture, build soil, provide a path, etc., we mulch first, then pull back the mulch and plant. Planning ahead is a given in this scheme, but that's up to you, just so there's mulch put down in the Fall for Spring planting. Also, a plan on paper is a good idea. It'll give you some idea about how much space is needed, as well as a place to make notes about planting earlier or later, weather, bugs, etc. Some pull the mulch way back, giving the soil a chance to warm up in the Spring. Crops (like veggies) will need both sunshine (and longer days) and water to mature -- see Vegetables.



EVERYTHING'S A CONTAINER

But it's up to you to decide what to put in it! A container was chosen for the seeds below, because they would probably need special soil and extra water. But flowers and an arrangement are much easier to water or care for in a container right outside your door. And herbs are only a step away from many kitchens. Consider the container's depth, water (holes or not in the bottom) and soil mix for the plants planned for it.



Mallow used to much water.

Planter soil is important -- and so is the compost you add to it. Since it will disappear, more compost may be necessary and from time to time, the soil will have to be replaced. Old soil from containers is great for the composter, or if there's too much -- fill in those holes in the yard, because disease and pests could get into container soil and you don't want to put it around "good" plants.

COMPOST see **Compost Short Cuts** on Home page.

FERTILIZER

Compost is our fertilizer of choice. It helps the soil in so many ways, but sometimes a fish fertilizer is needed, or another organic type like bone meal or limestone or even a cover crop. A soil test is the best indicator for what's necessary -- it gives the proper pH scale for your area and the agriculture office has all the info you need regarding fruits, vegetables, etc. We avoid chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pest control methods.

pH scale runs from 0 to 14, extremely acidic, (0 being like clorox and 14 like ammonia (or battery acid to lye, as some say.) Plants like the pH to be 6.5-7. That's when they take up the most nutrients. But since our soil (NC) is more acidic, about 5, limestone would bring the pH up to 6 or 6.5 -- better for veggies. Some of our native plants, prefer acidic soils, like blueberries. The purveyor of plants would be a good person to ask, or look it up, if you're not sure what a particular species likes.

Organic mulches of any kind are good: Shredded leaves and clippings made smaller from shrubs and small trees (are free) and even better. Grass clippings often need to be covered or incorporated in compost piles, due to their weediness -- in our garden, because we avoid weed killers.

FLOWER GARDENS

Flowers. Now there's something you can't get enough of. We prefer the native varieties -- you may have to look far and wide for them, but others will be glad to share with you. Some people think natives don't bloom as largely. That's true. Or that they're too tall. That's also true; though you might also say that many wildflowers are too short. And by far, native plants are more interesting, give a sense of place (which makes planting a whole lot easier,) and information is no more than a touch away on the internet.

HERB GARDENS

can also be a matter of the family's choosing -- some folks like to grow things -- any thing -- and some like formal herb gardens and some like the here and there approach. Here at I-77 and I-40, herbs are mostly grown to eat or heal.

To eat or culinarily speaking, one garden contains the four perennial favorites: Mint, Parsley, Thyme and Chives. (Some give mint its own place, because it spreads so heartily; and parsley, because it is a biennial, requiring seeds spread all around a parsley plant to insure next year's plants.) Basil and Marjoram (the annual form of Oregano) are annuals. These do not come up each year, so they have to be replanted.

Once mulch has been placed, seeds can be used for any of these, plants or seeds show and grow best, with the smallest plant species in front. In this case, first there would be thyme, followed by marjoram, chives, parsley, basil and finally mint. From these sizes, one can easily see where

to add a new herb. The lemon thymes and lemon basil can be placed near the old basil; or oregano, near the marjoram. Lavender and Tarragon don't do very well around here (maybe they like a loamier soil,) so they'd remain after the chives, while the Sage would go with the Basil, and Coriander with Parsley. The wanderers would be in the back with the "tall guys," like dill and fennel. Rosemary has many species, so look carefully or ask about which plant you have: some are tiny, some sprawl, many are larger and it often becomes a shrub. When in doubt, ask. Being a perennial, if Rosemary is in the wrong place, just wait until Fall, whack it off and replant in a fitting space.

To eat, herbs can be very convenient, but easily overdone. Dried herbs are said to be three times more potent than fresh. Herb charts are easily found online, but a little bit of favorite ones sprinkled here and there can serve as a fresh garnish and help to determine which herbs are preferred by family and friends. When it comes to pasta, rice, potatoes, etc. or even beans, a fresh branch from the garden can be snapped off and put right into the pot (leaving enough stem to remove it (and leave the flavor) at the end of cooking.)

Think you'll find that bees especially appreciate an herb garden, they've been known to access the Borage, Cat Mint, Germander, Lavender, Rosemary, and Russian Sage (large and unruly, too -- best in the back!)

see Food/Recipes on the home page.

see Old Remedies section on home page for plants that support human health, herb and otherwise.

LANDSCAPE Some hold to the idea that your lot should "blend in" with the neighbors, or surrounding natural forces, but this site tries to get the most from your living space. What do you want? Edible? Around the crossroads, figs, paw paws, apples, plums, persimmons, pecans and mulberries are often seen. Water control? Neighborhood stability? See Trees section. Segments of gardens earlier mentioned -- lots of containers, etc. or maybe a combination of any and all. One idea is to plant asparagus and other sustainable crops with the shrubs in back.

There are some basic tools we've found over the years and through many folks, helpful. The first, of course, is the weedeater. It's very helpful, not only to go around obscure areas where grass tends to grow; but it can even go into gardens, when they get out of hand, or under shrubs. Cutting weeds down, for instance, poison ivy and aggressive ground covers or other plants, will eventually "do them in." The old flame thrower is another. It doesn't actually create a flame, but will quickly rid an area of greenery. It connects to a tank of gas, the same used in outdoor grills, and is available at farm stores. The rental or purchase of a chipper is also handy for making instant mulch. If you've had some experience with a tool or gadget, let us know, so we can include your thoughts.

One idea, and it has proven true, is to leave room between plantings and mulch for a mower to travel. Also, make everything next to a lawn, curved, so the lawn mower can easily navigate.

And for a weed killer, some spray vinegar, but we find where the lawn and plants are well managed, weeds are not a problem.

MULCH All beds, vegetable, flower, herb, and especially landscape, are mulched. When trees are mulched, it looks neat, but it's really imitating a forest. Sometimes even mulch can be overdone. Trees need to breathe, too, and putting mulch too close will result in damp bark and an invitation for disease. Everything, even the vegetables grown here at I-77 and I-40 are surrounded and encased in mulch. No, we don't like weeds, either, plus most of us live in subdivisions, so we mulch first, and then plant (pull back the mulch and plant.) Mulch has so many advantages – water retention, fertilizer placement, easier weeding. Of course, you may have to plan ahead -- from Fall to Spring. Mulch should be placed in the Fall for next year's garden. Yes, mulching is more of a materials handling problem than gardening, but it makes sense and ease in the long run. One can either till, then mulch or mulch heavily over grass – either way, it's worth the effort. When mulch is placed, even "green," between rows of plants, it's called sheet composting. In fact, after several years of mulch, without chemicals, you may find that vegetables and flowers do just fine, even without fertilizer.

Mulch is also not a new idea. Ruth Stout came up with this idea years ago, and you'll find more details, for instance, from Mother Earth News site: <http://www.motherearthnews.com/Organic-Gardening/2004-02-01/Ruth-Stouts-System.aspx>

What can be used as mulch? Probably everything/anything, but consider what's on top for everyone to see (including yourself;) and what lives beneath the mulch. If you're curious about what's beneath the mulch, see the **COMPOST SHORT CUTS** by clicking on that heading at the Home page.

NATURAL GARDENING If you simply allow solid organic material to decompose naturally, without any chemical disturbance, it will turn into a soil-like product (compost,) that's used to fertilize gardens, flowers, and other plants.

Sometimes grass or noxious weeds or plants have to be gotten rid of before mulching and decomposition can begin. In this case, cardboard seems like a good idea; but termites love cardboard and are known to live in houses and sheds. A little newsprint around the garden -- way in the back and under the preferred wood chips (because of cost) is tolerated. Most of the garden is mulched with Fall's dry leaves. At one time, grass clippings were tried (especially in the summer, when leaves are not bagged,) but they contain too many weed seeds (chickweed,) so lawn clippings were abandoned. Instead, leaves and stems from "limbed up" shrubs, trees and old crops provide much needed shade against scorching sun and periods of heat and dryness never before experienced. If green mulch were to be put right on the earth, it may rob the soil of valuable nitrogen, so some fish emulsion may be needed beneath greens.

Landscape cloth is a good alternative, especially close to the house. It's used with some pine straw, and though more expensive here, makes sense close to buildings. Spoiler alert: Some weeds or plants have the ability to come through the cloth, leaving roots behind and mulch can be difficult to remove. So it might be good to note the width of the cloth and how laid out. Other thoughts are that water may not go through the cloth; and it's also difficult to remove, if

the area is ever apt to be tilled.

Mulch's enrichment nourishes the soil and helps plants grow, but chemicals have to be avoided, too, for the soil to build itself up again. And for this, some use what's been called sheet composting. Whatever is bothering you, one at the crossroads had a problem with perennial sunflowers, roots and tubers and mulberry bushes. Also, it's a good way to get rid of weeds, like stegia, fescue, ivy, euonymous or young trees in your beds: maple trees and invasive vines, groundcovers, in general.

Groundcovers in Iredell tend to not only cover the ground you want, but have a habit of climbing trees, buildings, other plants, etc. Most of all, they take up valuable space some useful flower or shrub could occupy. Once the ground cover is down, it's down for good. People tell us they wished they never planted any of the invasive alien plants. Let us know what you're using -- or how. Check out the **COMPOST SHORT CUTS** section on the Home Page.

Speaking of climbing -- there's poison ivy. One person, who often battles it on large property, says the secret is not in spray, but simply cut it down with the weed eater. See also non poisonous households on the Home Page.

VEGETABLES We all know "different strokes for different folks," however, growing fresh vegetables, herbs, or fruits and nuts, not only gives a sense of joy for some; but getting something done, too. Your homesite garden can help reduce the family's food budget, when you think of how much that land is assessed and how much you've already invested in it: why not give it the best? You'll not only build up the soil using mulch and compost, but have fresh vegetables at your fingertips. See Year Round Gardening below.

WATER and RAIN section on the Home Page.

WEEDS and PESTS Weeds can be anything that is perennial and/or not growing where you want. Find out from your local Agriculture Center which weeds are common to your area and which plants are annual or perennial (lasting more than one year.) Or check the weed killer ads. Nip 'em in the bud by pulling or digging 'em out. (That's why we mulch – easy pulling.) Mulching will shade out most weeds, so when in doubt, cover it with mulch.

Keeping everything "neat and clean" may not be the best for predator "pests." They may need those weeds as a host plant. Instead of reaching for the poison, if you really like the crop you're getting, try to learn more about its pests, too. The answer may be planting earlier or later or leaving a certain weed.

NATIVE PLANTS See under **Good Things for Neighborhoods** on left side of Home Page.

TREES and SHRUBS Same as Above.

YEAR ROUND GARDENING is a "biggie" for the home gardener. Some people see dates

as a nuisance, but actually year round gardening can be a time-saver. In the past, these dates were accurate; but now with the change in weather patterns, both the dates and species may have to be changed. If you have any input regarding these dates and climate change, please let us know.

February 15 (the day after chocolate loving Valentine's Day) folks around I-77 and I-40 have serious thoughts about starting to plant cool weather and (maybe even perennial) crops. It's never too early to plant pea seeds.

March 15

Kale, Swiss chard, spinach, radishes, collards, and especially lettuce or mesclun should be planted in anticipation of April 1st's last frost. These are early crops, but be sure to leave some room for summer varieties. Carrots are a very good cool weather crop, too, but they don't do too well in the Piedmont clay. Others that may not be worth the space or turn strong if there's a lot of hot sun are cabbages, brussels sprouts, broccoli and cauliflower. You're the judge of that one.

April 15 is the date for sowing seeds of green beans, tomatoes, bush squashes, eggplants, and peppers, both sweet and hot. For potatoes, several eyes are needed, which can be gotten where plants are sold. If they're placed around or "in garden" compost piles, the location of potatoes will always be known, even if the rest of the garden undergoes many changes of vegetables during the season.

Corn was not mentioned, because it takes a great deal of space and there are many roadside stands and pick-your own farms around the crossroads.

Some folks wait 'til May for sweet potatoes, okra and melons. Also, not mentioned, were pumpkins and winter squashes, like butternut, acorn or buttercups. Pumpkins and squashes take up lots of room (viney,) so these are planted behind shrubs or under trees. Only one or two pumpkins are needed, plus a few winter squashes. And they don't mix well with the other veggies in the patch.

Then there is always the fall garden --

From August 15 to September 1, your Spring favorites can be planted again for fall picking. Some try these crops more into the shade, because the sun is hot and they require lots of water. A few plants of cauliflower and broccoli can be tried by September 1, while seeds of onions, beets and carrots sometimes make good.

Lettuce, spinach and kale should be planted in two-week intervals. And for lack of room, we like those in containers, where they can get plenty of water. And someone said they like to plant flowers with lettuce. That way, after the lettuce is harvested, the marigolds or petunias, will remain.

So what you really need is a list of plants; first so you can decide what you and your family really likes to eat, then, how tall, when, what, how close to plant, etc. from the Agriculture

Center in your county or state. Our county Ag Center even has a demonstration garden. Or you can access these through the internet.

We've thought about what's expensive here, need or want and how/why we grow them. Sometimes it's just not practical to grow your own. But in most cases, not only do we have enough for the summer, but like to store for winter. That's when we use the freezer, can, or dry extra bounty. Some things are better grown in containers, close to the kitchen or as part of the landscape for greater convenience.

We enjoy many Farmers' Markets, as well, here at the crossroads, so see the choices at the Home page.