

My Happy Healthy Garden by Julianne Labreche

My suburban garden in west central Ottawa may not be a showstopper but it's healthy and happy. Happy? Yes, most assuredly. After years of digging in the dirt, my feeling is that any healthy garden, by definition, is happy. After all, plants that are insect free, grown in good soil and planted in the right place tend to take off and thrive. That sense of wellbeing can't help but rub off. No wonder that working away in my garden makes me happy and healthy too. Gardening is my passion and my post-retirement tonic for good living.

With over thirty years of gardening under my secateurs, experience dictates that a healthy garden just doesn't happen without planning, nor does it happen overnight. Like a mouth-watering slow-cooked meal or a prized bottle of fine red wine, a healthy garden takes time, a little know-how and some tender loving care.

If there are any secrets to share, then here are ten simple tips I've learned over the years. Hopefully, they'll keep your garden healthy and happy too.

Tip One: Feed the Soil

Soil is more than "just dirt". It's a living, breathing diversity of microbes, earthworms and insects. Early in my gardening career, I remember shopping in local nurseries for exotic plants like tree peonies and Japanese maples, only to discover that heavy clay soil actually prefers weeds. Now, every year, I add aged manure and compost to the front and back beds and then watch nature do its work. Spring chores include turning and spreading the compost pile. Fall tasks include shredding leaves and spreading them over the garden beds.

Tip Two: Mulch is the Magic Word

Being a lazy gardener, mulch has become my best friend. I prefer the natural cedar mulch, purchasing it whenever possible in the off-season in late summer when prices are cheaper. Mulch has many advantages. It helps to keep the soil moist, especially during scorching hot days of summer. It dramatically reduces the amount of weeding required. It also looks and smells wonderfully woody. I avoid getting it too close to the plants though. Too much of a good thing can be the ruin of many a good plant, caused by poor aeration and rot.

Tip Three: Plant for Diversity

Biodiversity in a garden means adding a spicy mix of plants. Having a wide variety of plants reduces infestations of destructive insects and plant diseases. We all know the story of the emerald ash borer that wiped out many of the forests in Eastern Ontario, as well as many urban ash trees. With diversity, a single insect species or disease won't have the potential to do so much harm.

Tip Four: Keep Plant Selection Simple

Most of the Ottawa region is in zone 4b, so plant hardiness is dependent on plants that can survive colder climates and dramatic temperature fluctuations. That's why peonies thrive in Ottawa temperatures and lemon trees don't. Before buying a new plant, especially some rare, exotic cultivar, check in case it might prefer to head south for the winter. If you choose to take a chance, talk to other gardeners and learn from their mistakes.

Tip Five: Beware of Friends Bearing Plants

Years ago, a friend offered me several plants of potted mint, promising that they'd be easy to grow and would come back every year. Little did I know that mint is an aggressive garden thug, best potted to avoid its rampant spreading habits. Goutweed, no friend to this gardener, was another gifted plant. Beware of friends who offer plants, or do some sound research before planting them.

Tip Six: Plant the Right Plant in the Right Place

Most plants prefer that their first home be their last. Read the labels and double check before planting that new hydrangea or hibiscus. Sun loving plants need to be planted in a sunny location. Shade plants prefer shade. While that isn't rocket science, the site for your new plant will determine whether it will survive or get tossed in the compost heap.

Tip Seven: Create some Walking Paths

A good design plan always helps in a garden, even if it's one that evolves with time. Take a while to plan your garden design, either on paper or in your head, then create a few paths that will eliminate foot traffic on garden plants and give you time to amble and enjoy your garden.

Tip Eight: Water Thirsty Plants

A good soak when the soil is dry is a simple rule in gardening. The best time to water is early in the morning, before the sun is hot. A long, slow soak is preferred to the powerful splash of cold water from the hose.

Tip Nine: Plant for the Wildlife

There are gardeners who spend their days plotting the demise of local squirrels, rabbits and ground hogs. That kind of anger takes the fun out of gardening. If your focus is, like mine, on a pollinator gardener, you'll find an array of plants, including many native ones, to attract the birds and pollinating insects. These same perennials, shrubs and trees are often of little interest to more pesky wildlife. The exception is the vegetable bed. If you're into vegetable gardening, then good wire fences will protect your garden from these urban critters.

Tip Ten: Keep Your Garden Beds Tidy

I'm not a garden neat freak because helpful insects, birds and the wildlife need winter food and shelter. It is important however to practice good garden hygiene. A little weekly weeding will

spruce up the garden and reduce the spread of weeds or having them go to seed. Tidying up in the fall will help to avoid a mess of soggy stems and leaves come spring.

Self-Care for the Gardener

To stay healthy in your garden, here are a few suggestions:

- Apply sunscreen and bug repellent before gardening.
- Avoid gardening in the mid-day sun. Get outside during the early morning or late evening.
- Wear good quality gardening gloves to avoid cuts and bruises.
- Prop gardening tools against the wall, blade side inward, to avoid a serious accident.
- Avoid pesticides, usually unnecessary and their absence is healthier for you and your garden.



'Side Garden' -- This pathway makes accessing the backyard an enjoyable journey through the author's lush side garden.



'Backyard in Full Bloom' – Healthy soil means healthy plants. Healthy plants are better able to resist diseases and pests. The plants in the author's back garden provide proof that she has healthy soil!.

'Fresh Herbs' – Fresh herbs are a tasty addition to many recipes. Grow them close to the house for easy access.

All photos by Julianne Labreche

