

MINDFUL PLANTING

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When T.S. Eliot wrote “April is the cruellest month,” I doubt that he had gardening in mind. Still, April is a great time to be cruel to our plants. With the best gardening months ahead, lets’ consider some principles for honoring the space we cultivate, for choosing the right plants, and for placing them properly and with respect to the good earth.

Before planting anything, read about the needs of various plants. Beginners without a garden library note: Barbara Dalmrosch’s [A Garden Primer](#) is my favorite combination of “how-to” and philosophy; she is funny and honest about her own mistakes! Such brutal honesty is needed as much in the garden as in other forms of spiritual practice. Don’t lie to yourself. Four hours of sun is not “full sun” and though the sun-loving plant you place in such a spot may live, it is probably going to be a puny specimen.

A rewarding way to prevent garden mistakes involves meditation. I usually reserve it for a permanent planting; basil, vegetables, and other annuals rotate around my beds from year to year, and while I love them dearly I can easily move them early on. For other plants, meditation can reveal the *Genius Loci* of a space. This power, using the ancient Latin term, comes from the land itself. *Genius Loci* is a spirit we should honor so our gardens nestle in among what is already there. To perform the meditation, sit

comfortably near the spot where you will dig a planting hole. Then take stock of the other plants, the sun that is likely to shine there, the slope of the ground that may make rain-water puddle or run off too quickly. Then go into the meditation. Envision the small plant growing to its full extent and see if, when mature, it will crowd or shade out other plants you love. In the end, you may have to put your will in second place to the good of the plant and choose another spot. I'll add that in some cases, when you know in your bones that a spot is "just right," you might relocate what is already planted, but there's a catch.

Respecting *Genius Loci* means that we have no right to cut down a healthy tree to get sun for our flowers. And though I'm planning to remove one shrub this spring to make way for a vegetable bed, such acts are the exception, not the rule, of the type of gardening I advocate. When you must sacrifice something, give something back to the land to keep your practice mindful. Thus I'll plant another shrub, a native species in fact, to honor the spirit of the plant removed to make room for food that will sustain me.

We all have the pleasant experience of running home with a car-load of young plants from a greenhouse or garden show, such as two outstanding events held every April, the plant sale at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and Herbs Galore at Maymont. Before you load the trunk with plants, however, remember these essentials:

- ❖ Plant as soon as the soil is ready. Leaving a seedling in the pot too long will lead a pot-bound plant.
- ❖ When removing the plant from its pot, "tickle" the roots a bit so they will reach out into the soil.

- ❖ Don't dig when the soil is saturated! You'll glaze the side of the hole, making a clay pot that will bake hard later and trap the plant. Do "rough up" the sides of a hole even when the soil is ready; the roots will have a better chance of gaining purchase.
- ❖ Dig when the soil is friable—make a clod; it should crumble in your hand and neither clump like clay nor dissolve like fine dust.
- ❖ Be aware of the plant's water needs and give it enough, but not too much.
- ❖ Read about xeriscaping and find ways to re-use "gray water" from the home. Even with recent rains and snow, we may face another drought.

In recent years I've become an enthusiast for native plants, and I'll end by promoting them. In our hearts we should realize that such plants, best adapted to the quirky weather of our planting zone, are the best choices for the sacred space of the garden. Sadly, however, the mega-stores that dominate and despoil our commercial landscape usually don't stock them. Locally owned firms are more likely to have "local beauties" such as Spice Bush (*Lindera*) or Sassafras, so go to local businesses and ask about native plants and ways to conserve water. Just don't be cruel to your plants this April: the good earth will return the love you show.

References

Dalmrosch, Barbara. *A Garden Primer*. New York: Workman, 1988.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. <http://www.lewisginter.org/>

Maymont Foundation. www.maymont.org.