How to Choose the Right Plant for the Right Place

Gardening can seem difficult at times. Even though plants have their own way of communicating, it's not always clear what they want. Plant stress often manifests itself by losing leaves, abnormal color change, disease, or pest infestations, among other things. So, what caused the plant's stress to begin with? Does it need more water? Less water? More sun? Does it yearn for the ability to hide from your dog when he comes out to do his business? Or was it caused by deer, hail or frost? Not all plant stress is preventable but, if you choose plants that are well-suited to their location, they will be healthier plants. And healthy plants are less likely to become diseased. The same way we are less likely to get sick if we are well-rested and healthy. Colorado's diverse elevations, soil types, and microclimates mean that plant selection should be based on specific site conditions such as sun exposure, soil drainage, and water availability. Here are some things to consider when choosing the right plant.

1. How much sun does the location receive?

This is the first step in keeping your plants happy. It may seem like an obvious one, but we've all been tempted to make a sun-loving plant work in a shady location. And it might work for a little while, but if you're looking for plants that last and thrive, then it's best to plant sun plants in the sun and shade plants in the shade.

- Full Sun (6+ hours/day)
- Partial Shade (3-6 hours/day)
- Full Shade (<3 hours/day)

2. Does the soil tend to be wet, dry, or normal?

If your soil is dry, choosing natives or other species that are adapted to Colorado's climate can reduce the need for extra water and maintenance. Consider installing a drip irrigation system to minimize water waste. Adding mulch around your plants helps retain moisture, regulate soil temperature, and reduce weed growth. If the area has trouble draining or it's a moist, shady location, be sure to choose plants that are suited for those conditions.

- Group plants with similar water needs together.
- Place the most drought-tolerant plants in dry, exposed areas.
- Use slightly more water-loving plants in areas where runoff naturally collects.

3. What is your soil type?

Most of our soils will benefit from adding organic matter. Adding organic matter will help clay soil with drainage and sandy and rocky soil with water retention. Choosing a plant that tolerates the conditions is key. Another option is Raised Beds & Containers: These are great options if your native soil isn't ideal. They allow for better drainage, easier soil management, and can warm up more quickly in the spring.

- Clay Soil: Improve drainage with compost and choose deep-rooted plants.
- Sandy Soil: Add compost for water retention, use mulch and drought-tolerant plants.
- Rocky Soil: Consider alpine plants that thrive in well-draining conditions.

4. Do you know your USDA Hardiness zone?
Choose plants that can handle local temperature extremes. Here in the Tri Lakes Area our USDA Hardiness Zone is considered 5, but it's important to note that even the slightest increase in elevation can have a big impact on temperature. Choosing plants that are rated as a zone 5 or lower is crucial for success.

5. Do you have frequent visitors from wildlife?
If your garden is exposed in a neighborhood that is heavily populated by deer, choosing plants that are deer resistant and less browsed upon can save you a lot of heartache.

6. What is the habit of the plant?
When choosing plants, be sure to pay attention to the final size. You don't want to plant an 8-foot shrub under your front windows.

7. How much maintenance are you willing to do?
There is nothing wrong with choosing plants that are high maintenance but consider how much time you want to devote to your garden and choose plants accordingly. If you prefer, there are many low-maintenance plants available.

Tips for Plant Placement in Colorado Landscapes:

- South & West-Facing Areas: These get the most sun and heat, so use heat-resistant plants like Rabbitbrush, Blanket Flower, and Russian Sage.
- North & East-Facing Areas: These tend to be cooler and shadier, making them ideal for Serviceberry, Columbine, and Creeping Mahonia.
- Sloped Areas: Use deep-rooted plants like Little Bluestem grass to prevent erosion.
- Low Spots/Drainage Areas: Consider moisture-loving plants like Dogwood, Willow and Elderberry.

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