



## Not Perfect

Every once in a while someone who knows I write this blog asks to come see my gardens. I always shudder inwardly, because I know they're expecting to see the magnificent gardens that exist only in my head, instead of the very imperfect ones in my yard. I've made as many mistakes as anyone else, and then some.

The most common, and most fatal, mistake any new gardener makes is to plant for the site conditions you wish you had, instead of the ones you actually have. Most often, that's a yearning for bright sun-loving flowers, despite an overabundance of shade. You can have an utterly glorious shade garden, but not if you insist on trying to force plants that evolved in open meadows to change their ways. Be wary of nursery tags: "sun or part shade" is designed to tempt you to buy, not necessarily to impart truthful information, and while many plants will survive in less sun than they like, most won't thrive or put on much of a show. I mostly manage to avoid this problem, not because I've outgrown it, but because my yard is big enough to accommodate almost any growing condition.

There is a way to turn this weakness to your advantage, though. If you place the same plant in full sun and light shade, the second group will flower a week or two later than the first, thereby extending the season of bloom. Great for short-season favorites like peonies and irises.

My gardens also contain quite a few mistakes of the "before we knew better" variety. Both Chinese and Japanese wisteria have recently (finally!) been declared invasive, and can't be sold in Connecticut after October 1. My courtyard columns are wrapped in American wisteria (at least they will be, once the columns are restored) but the Japanese wisteria in the back yard, which just finished covering itself in light purple, awaits execution. It's a daunting job, since the roots snake out in every direction. A few years ago I engaged in all-out war with massively overgrown forsythia, planted long ago by some previous owner, but that battle, mercifully, is down to occasional skirmishes with random re-sprouting branches. Pachysandra, ajuga, and vinca still lurk, while barberry is a bully and a menace. I'll get to them someday.

Keep notes! You'll want to know what variety that dahlia was, or when, exactly, that shrub bloomed, or where you bought that plant. That last question has just presented itself: last fall I wrote about planting two very young pawpaws, and even though I planted them as soon as they arrived and deer-proofed them with wire cages, only one

survived the winter. Apparently I forgot to write down the vendor's name in my garden notebook, but the in-a-hurry me of six months ago must have had a careful moment, because just yesterday I discovered the receipt stuck to the side of the refrigerator. Now I can plead for replacement.

Two ways to lower the horticulture mortality rate: first, don't buy anything unless you have a spot in mind for it. (I break this rule sporadically throughout the summer, and spectacularly during the autumn sales.) It does plants no good to languish in skimpy plastic pots while you try to figure out where to put them. And it does your back no good to just stick them in anywhere (this is called 'heeling in'), promising yourself it's just temporary, only to find two years have slipped by and that cute little plant you need to relocate is now taller than you. Ask me how I know this.

Second rule: Whenever you're transplanting, dig the new hole *before* you dig up the old plant. Young trees and shrubs have surprisingly deep, dense, and tenacious root systems, and by the time they're finally out you may find yourself more tired than you expected to be. Don't set yourself up to skimp on preparing the tree's new home.

Don't focus your design solely on flowers. It's easy to fall into this trap when admiring the lush photographs in the nursery catalogs. I fight this battle every year, wanting some of everything but knowing the results will disappoint. You need height, structure, foliage, and ground covers to create a coherent plan, plus something to look at in the winter.

Possibly the biggest mistake: being unrealistic about how much garden you can manage. I bought three acres, filled with dreams of Sissinghurst or Longwood Gardens, blithely ignoring the sobering reality that they have *staff* for all those meticulously cared-for beds. Seven years older, I find myself sometimes struggling to keep up with my overly ambitious gardens, and looking for lower-maintenance options for the more difficult areas. If a garden becomes a burden instead of a joy, ditch it. If all you can think of is the hours of weeding it requires, rip it out. Better to putter happily with a few potted geraniums. No mistakes, and no apologies.