

GARDENING

It's all in the soil



CAROLINE BROOME

Creating a garden, whether you're starting from scratch or developing an existing one, can be a daunting task. A blank canvas can overwhelm; where to start?

But then a mature, sometimes overgrown or neglected plot, can seem insurmountable.

So, over the coming year, I'm going to help you navigate your way towards year-round, manageable planting schemes, season by season. But first and foremost, ask yourself a very fundamental

question: What do you want from your garden? Now, I don't want to rain on your parade, but if you want flowers that bloom throughout all four seasons, attractive evergreen shrubs and innovative planting schemes, with as little maintenance as possible, then Buy Plastic or hire a gardener! Seriously, one has to manage one's expectations. If you are realistic from the outset, then you can create a landscape that suits your lifestyle, tastes and resources without it becoming a millstone around your neck.

Consider what you want your garden to provide: Do you need a lawn for children to play on and someone to mow? Do you want to grow your own fruit and veg? Do you long for a quiet haven to sit and relax in, surrounded by the sound of birds singing and bees buzzing? Could it be a formal outdoor room for entertaining? Need inspiration? Then you can research the internet, TV and horticultural publications, check out your neighbours' plots, join your local Horticultural Society. (I would say that, wouldn't I, I'm Chair and my husband David is Membership Secretary!)

One thing I have learned over the years, is that there is no such thing as an ideal situation for a garden. When it comes to planting, you adapt to your garden, not the other way round. If you are taking on an established garden, ideally you should experience the garden through all four seasons before making changes. But let's face it, how many of us want to wait that long! Establishing some fundamentals from the get-go is key:

- Observe the directions of the sun throughout the day for sunny and shady aspects.
- Is it exposed on the brow of a hill or sheltered by neighboring buildings or trees?
- Are you on a slope?
- Are you in a frost pocket?
- Do you have areas that are waterlogged or thick with tree roots?

And most important of all, what type of soil do you have? The very first lesson of my RHS General Certificate course was about soil. And just to get my point across, here are some words of wisdom: "Essentially, all life depends upon the soil." Dr Charles E Kellogg, Soil Scientist and Chief of the USDA's Bureau for Chemistry and Soils. "To be a successful farmer one must first know the nature of the soil." Xenophon, Ancient Greek philosopher and historian, student of Socrates, circa 430 - 354 BC. (NB: That applies to gardeners too.) "The nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself." Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President of The United States of America.

Testing the soil for its pH value is not rocket science. You can buy soil testing kits from your local nursery or garden centre. Whether it's acid, neutral or alkaline will determine what you can plant. There are clues: Rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias thrive in acid soils, whilst roses, clematis, viburnums and philadelphus require alkaline soils. Just to confuse, neutral (lucky you!) is a mixture, and judging by the number of viburnums and camellias growing happily side by side in the Suburb, I would hazard a guess that several areas of NW11 and N2 fall into that category.

There are lots of different types of soil structures: chalky, sandy, stony, but I'm going to concentrate on London Clay, typical of Suburb gardens. Typically, heavy clay soil is rock hard when dry and cracks in the summer but can become waterlogged in winter, feels sticky when wet, often forming a mossy surface 'cap'.

It's not hard to realise that planting straight into heavy clay

soil that has not been improved is a fool's errand. What do I mean by improved? Mulch Mulch Mulch! What is mulch? It's a protective layer of organic matter, which acts as a blanket, keeps weeds down, returns nutrients to a depleted soil, feeds worms who pull it down into the soil below, which in turn opens up its structure, breaks down clumps, improves drainage, builds up soil levels depleted by natural erosion. This autumn, call it Year One, apply a 10cm layer to damp soil, then annually, ideally in autumn after leaf drop. Wherever possible, incorporate a compost heap or bins into your scheme, as this will provide the perfect home-made mulch and soil improver.

However, in addition, there are various different media, which mimic natural conditions:

- For alkaline heavy clay, apply well-rotted manure.
- Acid soil prefers bark chippings
- In woodland conditions, leaf

mould (preferably home-made*, but we'll come to that) is ideal

- Apply grit or gravel to any of your containers
- Shingle or slate lend themselves to formal dry gardens

Having implemented the first principle of gardening: Know Thy Soil, then, and only then, should you start to think about planting. In future editions I'm going to guide you through the seasons, concentrating on developing successful planting schemes for conditions most common to Suburb gardens, from very dry shade, moist boggy conditions, to exposed sunny sites.

**And here is your autumn homework: If you don't have a compost heap, gather up fallen leaves into black plastic bags, tie off the tops, puncture bag with holes, set aside in a shady corner for about a year and hopefully next autumn you will have lovely home-made leaf mold to mulch your borders.*



Photos: Caroline Broome

Looking forward to getting together again

MARJORIE HARRIS

With fingers crossed that virtual events are a thing of the past, Horticultural Society events for the rest of the year, both live and via Zoom, can be found at www.hortsoc.co.uk, or from the membership secretary, David Broome (020 8444 2329). From September we plan monthly Zoom talks on various topics, except on 14 October, when Philip Colman will be at Fellowship House at 7.30pm to talk about his much-loved family firm, Finchley Nurseries (members free, non-members £2 at the door).

Towards the end of the year, we hope to hold a party to celebrate the fact that, at last, members can get together again to swap stories of how their gardens are growing, or just talk face to face.

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