



Redding Garden Club

Garden Tips

10 Common Garden Mistakes

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This past spring I fell in love with Iceland poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*). So I brought several home, planted them, and watched them die. What happened? For one, it turns out they don't handle heat very well, and last summer was a scorcher. It also turned out that the well-drained soil I so lovingly prepared for them was too well-drained and couldn't retain enough water. Much later, I found out Iceland poppies are usually considered annuals in zone 5, so they might not have made it through the winter anyway.

Although I prefer to think of it as "earning my garden stripes," I've made lots of common garden mistakes in my life. Here are 10 of the most common:

- 1. Planting Too Early.** The average last frost date in Connecticut is mid-to-late May. Don't be fooled by seeing flowers for sale before then; it doesn't mean it's safe to plant tender annuals. Check the growing requirements, watch the weather forecast, and when necessary provide protection with a cold frame, row cover, or an upside-down paper bag or box.
- 2. Not Knowing Your Gardening Zone.** In Redding Connecticut we live in USDA Hardiness Zone 6a, but many of our gardens act like the colder Zone 5. If you're not sure, ask your fellow gardeners or your nursery before buying.
- 3. Not Knowing Your Site.** Sun or shade? Dry or wet? Sometimes knowing isn't so easy. A yard that gets full sun in June may be partly shaded by August. A plot that's wet in spring can be bone-dry in summer. Keep notes on your site as it changes throughout the year, and the plants you choose will be more likely to survive.
- 4. Taking Short Cuts with Site Preparation.** Preparing your site before you plant pays long-term dividends. Add plenty of organic matter to improve texture, feed the soil, and encourage beneficial organisms. Minimize the use of pesticides and fertilizers, which can harm the soil's ecosystem. And have your soil tested. For a small fee, UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Laboratory will test your soil fertility and give you environmentally sound limestone and fertilizer recommendations. Email: soil_test@uconn.edu.
- 5. Plant Lust.** Falling in love with plants is one of the joys of gardening, but try to have a plan before you buy. What if your plan is, "Buy now and figure out where to put it later"? At the very least, try to know what growing environment(s) you have so you don't make a frustrating, and possibly costly mistake.
- 6. Over watering.** Too much water actually suffocates a plant. Signs of over watering include yellow lower leaves, wilted plants, and no new growth. Try to group plants with similar needs so you don't over water some and underwater others. If you're not sure, stick your finger into the soil several inches, and if the soil feels wet or damp, the plants don't need watering.
- 7. Using Too Many Chemicals in the Garden.** According to gardenweb.com, less than 5% of the various insects, beetles, spiders, worms and caterpillars are true pests, so "nukeing" the garden with pesticides often does far more harm than good. Many sprays will kill beneficial insects such as ladybugs and praying mantis, and spraying too much can allow certain pests to become resistant. Some chemicals can be harmful to people, especially those with immune problems, younger children and pets. Try organic solutions first, and take proper precautions if you decide to use chemicals.
- 8. Finding a "Vigorous Spreading Habit" a Good Selling Point.** Beware of plant descriptions that say they have a "vigorous" or "spreading" habit. You may be delighted when they establish themselves easily, but they may keep on spreading well beyond your intended area.

9. Not Being Able to Recognize Invasives. Invasive plants are non-native, vigorously growing plants with few, if any, enemies. They squeeze out native plants which provide much-needed food and shelter for animals and birds, and they've made their way into our open spaces and yards. Learn how to recognize invasives so you can pull them out before they get established. You'll find pictures and descriptions on our [Saving Natural Redding](#) page, or you can borrow a laminated flip-book from the RGC.

10. Not Knowing When to Prune. Most trees should be pruned in the late dormant season, since spring pruning increases the chance of infection and autumn/winter pruning increases the chance of dieback. There are exceptions: Trees and shrubs that bloom early should be pruned immediately after they finish blooming, and shrubs grown primarily for their foliage should be pruned before new growth begins. For a list of pruning times for trees and shrubs, download our [Pruning Techniques Presentation](#).