



Story available at <http://billingsgazette.net/articles/2008/08/03/features/yourhome/18-plant.txt>

Published on Sunday, August 03, 2008.
Last modified on 8/3/2008 at 1:07 am

Plant Paradise

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Dan Jellison and Walt Williams discovered it's difficult to keep three acres of blossoming flowers under wraps. Their gardens have bloomed into a tourist attraction, wedding facility and special event venue on Billings' south side.

Nearly 10 years ago Jellison and Williams opened their property to the public. They began by hosting three weddings that summer at the DanWalt Gardens. This year that number has grown to 43 weddings.

"I didn't set out to create this - it has evolved," Jellison said.

This spring, Jellison and Williams planted 30,000 annuals on the property, and maintain more than 250 different perennials, in a multitude of planter beds.

A serene setting, grapevines wind over trellises, broom corn swishes in the wind, giant cacti and sunflowers tower overhead and double tiger lilies bloom near the hearty hibiscus. It's a wonderland of flora and even includes a exotic frog collection.

Starting with the basics

Gardens are a sensory experience, involving textures, shapes, colors and smells. Incorporating these elements, while understanding each plant's individual needs, is an art.

"When I first started gardening, I loved plants, but how to place them, where to place them, how do they do in the shade, sun, dappled shade - these are things you can't learn overnight. Gardens need to evolve," Jellison said.

"If we went in and set all this, up you'd think, 'How am I going to take care of this?' " Williams said.

Planter beds 101

"When you first start to build a garden, start small," Jellison said. He recommends grabbing a can of spray paint and spraying the outline for a simple planter bed on the lawn.

Then dig a hole in the middle of the outlined area.

"Skim off all the sod and dump it upside-down in the hole. It is that simple," Jellison said.

Once the sod is removed, dig around the edge that you've created with an irrigating shovel. Irrigating shovels are smaller than regular shovels, and have a flatter scoop with rounded blade.

Use the shovel to dig from the edge, pushing dirt into the center of the planter, creating a mound. Jellison said it is not necessary to add any more dirt than what you dig out.

Tilling may be required in large areas.

When creating the edge, it is important to keep pushing away the dirt to create a mound. This mound brings plants up so roots have good drainage and gives a sculpted look to the planter area. Make the edge at least six inches deep, up to 10 inches, Jellison said.

This trench "edging" needs a touch-up once a year to keep a straight edge, and keeps the majority of weeds encroaching from the lawn out of the planter.

Planter beds are one of many types gardeners can create.

Another popular option is a raised planter bed, which can be constructed just about anywhere, including on top of pavement.

These raised beds are ideal to overcome soil problems or poor drainage and are excellent for elderly or disabled gardeners, because gardeners do not have to bend down to maintain the bed.

Soil quality

The DanWalt gardens are ideally located - Jellison's property was a floodplain. As a result the soil is sandy and easy to grow plants in.

In areas with less-than-ideal soil, Jellison recommends to mix a compost such as Soil Pep with the soil.

"Cultivation is the key to any garden," he said.

Montana State University horticulturist Cheryl-Moore Gough said coarse sand is particularly helpful in this region to aerate heavy compacted soils.

Depending on location, soils can be made of hard clay, or contain shale, clay and rocks. Creating soil that is good to grow plants in takes a bit of amending with compost, peat moss, rotted manure and other material to improve the texture.

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