

## Planning Ahead

### Start with a Plan

- **Assess the views, both good and bad.** View positions are the particular spots from which the landscape is customarily seen. One view position might be from a window at the kitchen table where you sit each morning or evening. Another view position might be from a second story window onto the garden below or from a patio looking into the backyard. An obvious view position is from your front walkway leading to the door.
- **Identify focal points.** Much of your landscaping revolves around focal points. Maybe it's a large rock in the backyard, small pond or fountain, an ornamental tree or shrub, or a swing hanging from the old oak tree in the backyard.
- **Decide which existing plants you want to keep.** If existing plants are in the wrong spot, plan to divide or move them to more appropriate spots in your landscape.

### Assess the Site

- **Know the soil type.** Soil types include sandy, silt, clay, or loam. Sandy soil allows roots to penetrate it readily but water and nutrients drain away quickly. Silt soil retains water well, but lacks important air space between its particles. Clay soil packs together densely, holding water and impairing drainage. Dry, clay soil is very hard. Loam soil is the ideal soil. It retains moisture, air, and nutrients, yet drains easily.

Most soils can be improved with organic matter, such as peat, compost, or well-rotted manure. Peat moss incorporated into sandy soil will help the soil retain moisture, and when added to clay soil will help aerate the soil and make it drain more easily.

- **Know light conditions.** If your yard is shaded by trees or buildings, make sure you plan for the planting of shade plants. If your yard gets full sun, plan accordingly with sun-loving plants. For true accuracy, watch the changing light conditions in your yard for one full day. You may notice things that you were never aware of before. Keep in mind, though, that the sun is lower in the sky during the winter months so shadows may fall differently than they would in the summertime.
- **Know the pH of your soil.** pH is measured on a scale of 0 to 14, with the low end representing acidity and the high end representing alkalinity. In most cases, a neutral to slightly acidic soil of 6.5 to 7.0 is best.

By sending a soil sample to your local agricultural extension service, pH can be determined. Alkaline soil can be neutralized by adding sulfur, and acid soil may need an application of lime. (Most of southeastern Wisconsin's soil is alkaline.)

### Question Yourself About Intended Plant Selections

- **Know the hardiness zone for the site** One very important point to remember is that you need to put the right plant in the right place. Every spring my interest is pricked by new and different offerings of annuals, perennials, and shrubs. But I know I have to temper my excitement until I know for sure the plants are hardy for this area.

Because southeastern Wisconsin is considered a Zone 4 on most hardiness maps (hardiness indicates how much cold a plant can withstand while continuing to grow normally), I have to limit my plant selections to those with the same zone number or smaller. I've sometimes tried plants that are tagged with a Zone 5, which is a tad milder than we are, but I've given them added winter protection with mulch or burlap.

Check to see where your seed or plant catalog originates from. If it comes from Georgia or South Carolina, it might have quite a few plant offerings in higher numbered zones, such as 7 or 8. You could only expect these plants to survive throughout our warm, summer growing season. They would not overwinter here.

### **Other Questions to Consider**

- Do I want to go formal or informal?
- What color scheme appeals to me?
- How much can I budget for the project?
- How much lawn area do I need?
- Could I use tall shade trees on the south side of the house to help shade and cool it in summer (deciduous trees will lose their foliage in winter and more sunlight will reach the home to help heat it in winter)?
- Is my soil good enough for the plants I wish to incorporate?
- Am I interested in any specialty gardens, such as rose, moon, wildflower, potpourri, fragrance, butterfly, hummingbird, herb, aquatic, or texture garden?
- Do I want more than one sitting area in my garden to view flower beds, relax at the end of the day, etc.?
- Do I have any bad views that need to be screened or good views that I'd like emphasized?
- Do I want to incorporate a vegetable garden? If so, do I have a spot that gets at least 6 to 8 hours of direct sun each day?
- How much time can I devote to my garden? Do I need to plan for fast and easy maintenance? I've only brushed the surface, but hopefully you'll continue to do your homework and will come up with unique and colorful plans for your own backyard.