

Do You Have a Gardening Plan?

by Susan Camp

Humorist Bailey White, in her essay “Gardening” from her 1993 book “Mama Makes Up Her Mind”, writes of falling into the old gardening trap of imagining the perfect garden, in her case, a wildflower meadow. Ms. White then presents her five year plan to develop this wildflower paradise, at the end of which she wanders through the rows in a flowing, white dress, admiring the sights and scents of the many varieties she has nurtured through the seasons. After achieving her romantic dream, she quickly tires of the end product and moves on to a new plan for intensive gardening. She gives the flowing gown to her sister.

Every Master Gardener will tell you that a plan for landscape design is a necessity when you move into a new home or make major changes to an existing design. The Virginia Master Gardener Handbook notes that the planning process is the most important part of landscape design, but points out that planning frequently is neglected. I know this to be true because my husband and I have made almost every gardening mistake ever made. We have never had a plan. We moved to our wonderful property in Gloucester 19 years ago, inheriting some semi-established flower gardens, including huge daylily (*Hemerocallis*) beds and a lovely front garden surrounded by an American boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) hedge. We thought we just had to weed, water when necessary, maintain healthy plants, and replace sickly ones as necessary. We were wrong.

All went well for about 12 years, until time constraints and major house renovations got in the way of caring for the flowers and shrubs. Weeds invaded the daylily beds, the boxwood hedge grew leggy from improper pruning, and perennials got out of control. Thinking about gardening became exhausting. I retired from my position as a nursing educator and took the Master Gardener course. I would like to say that we then developed a plan, but that would not be true. What actually happened was that we had to have our septic system replaced and a new septic field dug.

After that debacle, we pulled out the boxwoods and replaced them with a white picket fence. We cut down a dying Serviceberry tree (*Amelanchier arborea*) that we had nursed through the 1998 ice storm and Hurricane Isabel, and removed the plants from the front garden. We resolved to start over. We still did not have a plan. I spent hours reading gardening manuals and magazines, but did not find a plan that fit our particular needs. That is when I decided to adapt what I already knew to the gardening process.

I had taught registered nursing students for 18 years. Several decades ago, nursing educators recognized that nurses needed a systematic, logical process for planning patient care. The Nursing Process was the result, modeled after the scientific process and problem-solving tools used in other professions. It is a simple, six step process: assessment of the issues; problem identification; outcome identification (short and long term goals); planning what you are going to

do; implementation of the plan; and evaluation of the outcomes. It was easy for me to adapt the Nursing Process to gardening. There are many gardening plans/processes in the literature and on the market, but it may seem daunting to follow a process that uses unfamiliar terms. Use a process you already know from your profession or occupation to develop your garden plan of care.

For us, the first step is assessment. We have removed the old plants and pathways and examined the state of the hardscape, determining that we need to level the brick walkways and the slates in front of the steps. The picket fence provides us with boundaries for the beds. We have decided to use raised beds, but will need to have soil analysis performed by sending a soil sample to VA Tech to determine soil texture, fertility, and pH. Other areas for assessment include drainage, soil compaction, sun and shade patterns, and microclimates. A detailed scale map of the garden is a necessity for the entire process.

As we work our way through the process of planning and planting this new garden, I will keep you informed of our progress. Did I mention that a new landscape design will take several years to develop and implement?

Every garden, flower or vegetable, should be a labor of love, not drudgery. Master Gardeners can help. We may not be able to answer every question, but we can provide you with resources, based on scientific research, to guide you toward your gardening goals. And, once your garden is complete, you can, like Bailey White, start all over again with a new plan!

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