

Garden Planning Fun

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For a gardener, February is a tough month. It's been many weeks since we could do any outdoor gardening, and even the plants we have inside are looking pale and unhappy from lack of sunlight. All the seed catalogs have arrived in the mail and after looking at all the pretty pictures, I'm ready to order one of everything. It's easy to sit around dreaming about what your garden would look like if you had all those special plants, but let's face it; most of us don't have the money or garden space to plant them all. This year, let's do some realistic planning!

The first step is to decide what kind of garden you want. Would you love to have lots of flowers? Do you want all the plants necessary to make salsa? Maybe you'd like to have a pot full of salad fixings on your front porch. Look through the catalogs and think about what plants you really want.

The next step is kind of a memory game; you need to remember what your yard is like. That's hard to do when it's covered with snow! Are there places that are sunny all day in the summer, or do you have lots of trees that make cooling shade? Some plants need lots of sunlight to thrive and some only need a little. Have you ever dug a hole or played in the dirt? What is it like? Some plants will only grow where the soil is rich and loose; some grow well where the soil is hard and dry, others where the soil is soggy. When you've remembered what conditions you have in your yard, compare them to the ones listed by your favorite plants in the catalogs. Be sure to check the hardiness zone of perennial plants in the catalogs, Dakota County is in northern zone four. Plants listed with a zone of a higher number, like five or six, aren't hardy enough to grow here, they'll die of cold over the winter. You can use most annual plants though; they only live for one growing season anyhow. If you're lucky, the growing conditions in your yard match with the plants you like. If they don't match, you'll need to consider different plants, or growing plants in pots where you can use healthier soil or move them into the sun. Ordering seeds or plants that won't grow in your yard is a waste of time and money.

The third step is a reality check. How much work are you willing to do in your garden? Will your parents help you get started? Do you have enough money to buy bedding plants in the spring or should you order seeds, which are cheaper? Do you want to work in your garden every day or just once a week? In any case, if this will be your first garden, you should start small with just a few plants in a small area. My favorite way to get started is with a large whiskey barrel planter, but you can be creative and use any large container that has holes for drainage in the bottom. Some people use old sinks or rusted out wheelbarrows as planters. You'll only need about six to eight inches of soil for annual flowers and vegetables. If your container will be deeper than that, you can put some empty plastic bottles in the bottom. That way you won't need to buy as much potting soil and your planter will be lighter.

The last step is to order your seeds or plants. You'll need permission and help from a grown-up for this. Then just follow the directions in the catalog. When your seeds arrive in the mail, it will probably be too early to plant them, even in pots inside, so be patient! In March, I'll tell you how to make seed tapes to make your planting easier.