

HOME-GARDEN

How to practice 'right plant, right place' this season

Liz Nye Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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Garden centers in June spark a mixed sense of excitement and overwhelm. Vibrant, healthy plants line tables just waiting for eager gardeners like me to take them home and — despite best intentions — do them harm.

“We’ve all been there,” Mark Richardson says. Mark is the Director of Horticulture at New England Botanic Garden. “This time of year, you might set your heart on a plant like blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) because of its interesting steel-blue flowers only to be disappointed when you discover that what you brought home thrives in a wetland environment and will never survive your sandy soil.”

If you're worried your garden could become the site of some unfortunate plant mishaps this season, there are options. First, Mark says, find a friend to give that lobelia to. Next, embrace the motto: “Right plant, right place.”

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“Right plant, right place” is a practical concept. It guides gardeners to choose plant species or cultivars suited to their site’s unique environmental conditions so that plants thrive without additional inputs like irrigation, fertilizers, or other soil amendments. At first, this guidance might feel limiting. But there’s a reason the phrase is popular among horticulturists. Planning a garden around “right plant, right place” principles saves time, money, and a lot of frustration when plants that aren’t getting what they need where they’re planted struggle or die. This practice can even become a source of inspiration — an opportunity to try new things and expand one's perspective on the garden as a harmonious ecosystem full of interesting plant communities.

Taking a “right plant, right place” approach starts by developing an understanding of a site’s environmental characteristics. How much sun does the space get throughout the day? What time of day experiences the most sun exposure? For many plants, shade in the afternoon is a good thing as it prevents stress from more intense scorching rays later in the day. What about the soil? Soil is alive with microorganisms, bacteria, fungi, nematodes, and more that recycle organic matter and make useful nutrients available to plants. In addition to this organic matter, soil holds a blend of minerals, rock particles, liquids, and gases. Gardeners can learn a lot about their soil’s composition by simply getting their hands on it. If soil doesn’t clump together well when squeezed, it’s likely sandy and will drain quickly. If it feels smooth, not coarse or granular, when rubbed between two fingers, it’s likely clayey and will retain water.

Other soil characteristics, such as acidity (pH), organic matter levels, and macronutrient composition, can be helpful to understand when practicing “right plant, right place,” but not so easy to assess by look and feel. Here in New England, soil tends to be acidic, but every site is different, and fully grasping soil makeup on a molecular level requires testing in a lab. Home gardeners can collect soil samples and send them in for testing through UMass Amherst’s Soil and Plant Nutrient Testing Laboratory, a process that can be easier than it sounds. Soil tests are especially important for gardeners growing edible plants as they can alert to the presence of contaminants like lead and other heavy metals.

In addition to sun and soil, a “right plant, right place” approach also considers space. What kind of space is available and how much does the plant need when it’s fully mature? Trees and large shrubs planted too close to building foundations or other elements in our built environment suffer. They also cause problems for homeowners. Better to avoid the difficult and costly process of relocating mature plants by thinking now of a garden’s evolution over the years ahead.

Finally, selecting native plants can help ensure compatibility between plant and place. Plants endemic to where we live possess adaptations specific to the climate, soil, and seasonal cycles we experience. In addition to their hardiness, native plants play essential roles in healthy ecosystems, so they make great choices for gardeners looking to support pollinator resources, habitat, and more.

“Right plant, right place” works because the plant world is a wonderfully expansive one. Multitudes of trees, shrubs, and perennials can support different aesthetics and ambitions. So, enjoy the process of discovery as you garden. It’s one of the best parts.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by the team at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. Located on 171 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden is one of the region's top horticultural resources. All year long, garden visitors experience the wonder of plants, learn about the natural world, and make joyful connections. There is so much growing at the garden. Discover it today at www.nebg.org. The column will be published on the third Sunday of the month.