

## ANSWER THESE SEVEN QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU START YOUR NEW GARDEN

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

Realtors tell me that today houses are selling fast, many often for well over the asking price. You may be moving into a beautifully landscaped house, or into a newly built home with grass and a few nondescript shrubs. What do your thoughts turn to when you sit on the patio with that morning cup of coffee? What new things you want to put in—hardscapes such as a patio, swimming pool, play equipment, a shed for lawn tools, a fence? And then there's the soft landscaping—which trees/shrubs, flower beds, and vegetable gardens will you plant, move, or eliminate?

Making those decisions can sometimes seem overwhelming, but answering the following questions may help you sort out what you want.

**1. *What is the look that you want?*** A formal style with everything carefully manicured and clipped, like the estate gardens in Europe? Or a more naturalized, English cottage feel? Drive around and take note of what you like/don't like about the landscaping of houses similar to yours. Notice, too, trees or shrubs that have outgrown their space—do they just need pruning, or should they have been planted farther away from the house, or perhaps in a different location altogether?

**2. *Whether you are refreshing an older landscape and house or starting from scratch, what blips do you have to work around—outbuildings such as a shed, a garage?*** Topographical features such as trees, shrubs, steep terrain, rocky soil, tired gardens, or a swampy area? How is the storm water runoff around the house handled?

**3. *In what agricultural zone will you live?*** This helps determine not only the average dates of first and last frosts, but how cold/hot weather will be throughout the year. Note where the sun rises and sets, which may influence the amount of shade or sun you get and thus, the kind of plants you choose to add to the landscape.

**4. *What is the average soil pH?*** You can buy soil testing kits or send for a kit from a state university that does testing. You also want to make sure that your soil is tested for lead content if you are going to have a vegetable garden. Although the University of Maryland no longer does soil testing, it maintains a list of labs that do (<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/soil-testing-and-soil-testing-labs>).

**5. *Do you want space for children and pets to play?*** Outdoor space usage has changed somewhat since my 40-somethings were small. Hardscapes now often include fire pits with several chairs for cozy, neighborly chats; large, enclosed trampolines; tree houses with climbing stations, swings, and slides, just to name a few. Instead of huge expanses of perfectly green, thick grass,, people are recognizing that more areas given to gardens and shrub beds, lawns with a mix of fescue and other grasses, and reduced use of pesticides, all contribute to healthier lawns and encourage pollinators to visit, improving the yield of our vegetable gardens and the beauty of our flower gardens.

**6. Will you mulch your vegetable/flower beds?** Whether brown or “green” mulch, you’ll want to avoid tree “volcanoes,” as building up the mulch around the trunk in a volcano shape encourages pests and diseases. Keep mulch a few inches away from the trunks of trees or shrubs. An alternative is living, or “green” mulch. Why? Two main reasons: first, most of these mulches, which used to be planted mainly between crops in vegetable gardens and in orchards, help replenish the soil; and second, they also help attract more pollinators to your yard. Pennsylvania State University provides some excellent advice on mulch at <https://extension.psu.edu/mulch-a-survey-of-available-options>.

**7. Perhaps most important of all the things you need to know: How much time are you willing to spend on the garden/yard weekly?** Take into consideration tasks such as mowing, watering, weeding, raking, and spreading mulch/planting “green mulch.” The University of Maryland provides a list of monthly gardening chores (<https://extension.umd.edu/resources/yard-garden/new-gardeners/gardening-resources>).

As your garden thrives, plants grow and many multiply. In future years, you’ll want to add dividing and replanting to your chores. You may also find that you want to change your initial plans—enlarge the patio, make more space for children, add that tree house, swings, and a slide, a swimming pool or a pond.

A garden is an ever-changing place!

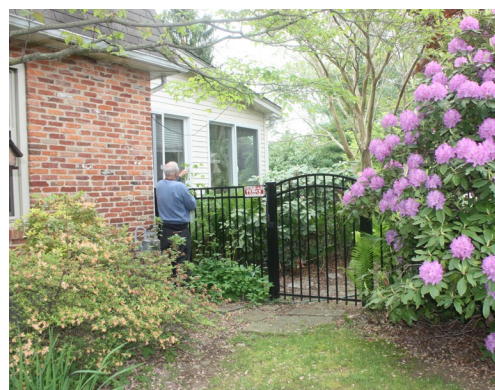


All pictures are courtesy photos by the author.

In 1974 we had been in this house one year. Some shrubs had been planted in the front, but on the east side, pictured here, were only a few haphazardly placed perennials.

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By 2020, the same house, again pictured here on the east side. The house had grown with a 1992 addition on the back of the house, a wrought iron fence (the first was split rail) in the early 2000s. Since 1974, nearly 100 trees and shrubs have been planted to provide lots of privacy as they surround the house and line the perimeter of the property.



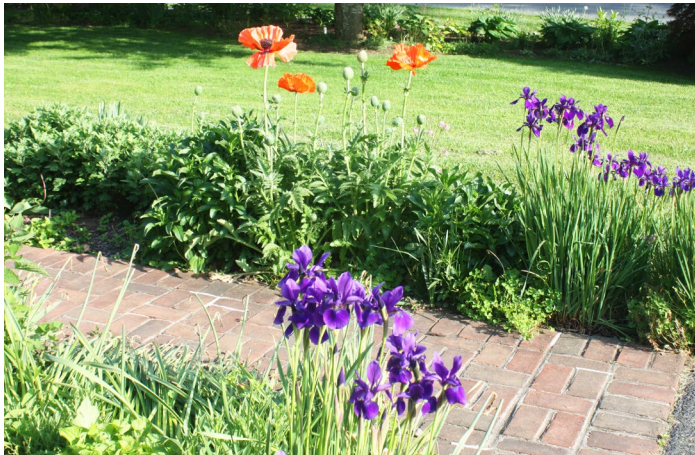


In 1974, the front of the house sported only a few shrubs and flowers. We would quickly learn that the front bank, which edged a ditch, our only stormwater management system, was susceptible to erosion since nothing was planted there.

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In 2021, flowerbeds fill the space between house and sidewalk; more beds with flowers, trees, and shrubs delineate the edges of the property. Although it can't be seen here, a retaining wall has solved the erosion problem. In addition, a long flowerbed, divided into shade and sun gardens, and several trees spread across the front of the property.

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In 2021, the front sidewalk is edged with an assortment of perennials chosen for height and color contrast. In the distance are the wide sun/shade bed and trees that, with the help of a new retaining wall, prevent erosion of the front bank.

*For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>*

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