

Gardening 101: Expert Gardeners Share Some Tricks of the Trade

By Heather Hoefler - Beaufort Gazette – Sunday March 26, 2006



Beaufort master gardener Marge Murray inspects a bush of carolina jasmine — a staple for every Lowcountry garden, she said. Murray has thousands of plants growing on her more than 6-acre land on St. Helena Island. PHOTOS BY HEATHER HOEFER-GAZETTE

Marge Murray had more than 30 years experience getting her hands and fingernails grimy in the garden. But when Murray moved to the Lowcountry seven years ago, she discovered plants she had never seen before and had questions no one seemed to be able to answer. "Other than 'Southern Living,' my gardening library was not much help—neither were the local book stores I went to," said the Beaufort master gardener, who also is a member of the Lowcountry Master Gardener Association.

Through a master gardening program at Clemson Extension, Murray studied up on the sometimes-complicated nature of southern horticulture. Now, she tends to thousands of flowers, perennials, annuals, shrubbery, ornamental grasses and trees on her more than 6-acre homestead on St. Helena Island. Her "garden" is so extensive, she writes weekly instructions on her calendar on when to fertilize, debut dead flowers or send soil samples to Clemson Extension. "Start small," Murray warned, shaking her head, "Start your garden close to your house and expand out when you decide to, Don't plant a 3-acre garden at the same time or you'll go crazy."

"Are you speaking from experience?" fellow master gardener Wendy Wilson chimed in. "Oh, yeah," Murray replied with a wry smile.

Murray, Wilson and Gloria Cartwright, another master gardener, recently toured Murray's veritable conservatory of southern plants. While they showed off their green thumbs by calling out the Latin names of plants, they shared some trade secrets for a successful Lowcountry garden.

First-time gardening

The gardening experts say now is the time to strut a garden, when the weather is warm and plants are blooming. But, first, have a plan. "People should ask themselves what colors do they want if they are making a plan based on color," Cartwright said. "Or if they should try something like jasmine. there's a lot to designing a garden".

Wilson said a common gardening pitfall is overplanting. First-time gardeners can be over-zealous about sprucing up their yard, but it's important to factor in how much time they're willing to spend in their gardens, she said. "You also need to know how big the plant is going to grow. You can plant things close to the house, but it could get too big." she added.

New homeowners should wait a year before starting a garden. Observe the yard to discover what has already been planted, because many plants take months to bloom, Murray said.

Also watch for the spots where the sun is shining at different times of the day. When deterring what should go in your garden, drive around and see what appeals to you. Go on garden tours visit a garden club and talk to local garden center experts, Murray said.

"See what you like and what you wish to replace, then research your options," Murray said. "Sun, space, water requirements, bloom time and air circulation are some of the things to consider." Unlike the rest of the world, plants are still blooming in the fall in Beaufort.

"Don't forget to tuck in that fall blooming - casia or confederate rose," Murray said. "In the heat of the summer, try planting crape myrtle or hydrangea to add a spark."

Cartwright also offered this piece advice for the "green gardener": Don't start planting seeds right away. "Go to the nursery and get quarts or gallon-size plants," she said.

"Talk to the people there and explain, 'I have a shady area, what type of plant should I buy?'" Wilson interjected.

Murray said she started seed planting in a container inside her house. "It was a lot of work. I don't think I'll ever do that again, but it certainly put on a good show," she said, holding a photograph of the front of her house covered in a cornucopia of bright colors.

Not-so-green at gardening

The gardening trio pontificated the benefits of research, but they said there's only one way to really dig deep into Lowcountry gardening. "I was fortunate to hear from a friend about the master gardener class offered by Clemson Extension," Murray said. "I would recommend this class to any serious gardener because I learned much more than what ornamental trees, shrubs and flowers to plant."

The Clemson Extension master gardener class also covers soils and the need for soil tests, pests and their treatments, pruning, proper planting, xeroscaping and mulching.

For those already tending to a garden, there is little to do unless winter chores have been neglected, Murray said. Remove all the diseased plant materials, prune hybrid tea and climbing roses and "deadhead" hydrangeas above the end of the bud (remove the dead flowers).

Now also is the time to fertilize roses, camellias and bulbs. Azaleas shouldn't be fertilized until after they have bloomed.

"Hopefully, you enjoyed the inflorescence on your ornamental grasses over the winter," Murray said. "But now is the time to sheer them back. Also, liriopie is

shooting up, so mow over the old grass with the mower on its highest setting." The most important gardening tip of all? "Don't forget to go out and smell the roses or the jasmine or the gardenias or ..." Murray said.

Reading materials

"South Carolina Gardener's Guide" by Jim Wilson

"Bulletproof Flowers for the South" by Jim Wilson

"Garden Guide to the Lower south" by the Trustees' Garden Club of Savannah

"Month-by-Month gardening in the South" by Don Hastings

"Gardening in the south with Don Hastings - Trees, Shrubs and Lawns"

Gardening magazines also are very helpful in providing up-to-date information.

Marge Murray Said she enjoys:

"The American Gardener," a publication of the American Horticultural Society

"Garden Gate"

"Carolina Gardener"

"Simply Southern," a garden guide written by the Escambia County Master gardeners with a special month-by-month section, perfect for zones 8b and 9a. The book is available at Clemson Extension Services.
