

Garden Myths

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Myths about Vegetable Misc

- #1 To get sweeter tomatoes, add sugar to the soil when planting.
- #2 Veggies must have full sun.
- #3 Wilting is a sign that it's time to water.
- #4 Compost bins must sit on soil.
- #5 Change potting soil in containers every season.
- #6 Gravel helps containers to drain.
- #7 Ladybugs are the best predators to release in the garden.
- #8 Eggshells discourage slugs.
- #9 Put kitchen waste into the compost pile.
- #10 Plant potatoes on Good Friday, peas on St Patrick's Day, tomatoes on Mother's Day.

Myths about Trees

- #1 Stake newly planted trees.
- #2 When planting a tree or shrub, dig the hole twice as wide and twice as deep as the root-ball.
- #3 You should work organic material in a new hole dug for a fruit tree.
- #4 Don't plant flowers under trees.
- #5 If a plant is under stress, it should be fed.

Myths about Soil

- #1 Add sand to loosen heavy, clay soil.
- #2 Fertilize the garden as a matter of course.
- #3 Use topsoil.
- #4 Till the soil every time you need to re-plant a seasonal flower bed or vegetable garden.
- #5 When planting any large plant, the soil should be amended.

Myths about Pesticides and Fertilizing

- #1 Organic pesticides are less toxic than synthetic ones.
- #2 When it comes to fertilizers and pesticides, if a little is good, twice is better.
- #3 Routinely douse plants with pesticides when there aren't any pests in sight.
- #4 Use Vitamin B1 with transplants to "prevent transplant shock."

Myths about Lawn and Landscape

- #1 Native and well-adapted plants are much better and much more environmentally sustainable" for home landscaping purposes.
- #2 Buy plants on impulse hoping to find a place for them in the garden later.
- #3 Believe that just because the nursery sells it, it must grow here.
- #4 Full-sun plants grow only in full sun.
- #5 Plucking or spraying dandelions is the best way to keep them out of your lawn and garden.

Myths about Watering

- #1 Xeriscape plants don't need water.
- #2 Sunshine focused through water droplets will burn leaves.
- #3 Garden plants, trees, shrubs and lawns need 1 inch of water per week.
- #4 It is bad to water plants after the sun has gone down or near dusk.
- #5 No matter where you plant something, particularly a big tree, its roots will grow to where the water is.

Myths about Vegetable Misc

#1 To get sweeter tomatoes, add sugar to the soil when planting. Sweeter tomatoes do have a higher sugar content, but not because of the amount of sugar in the soil! Plants deposit sugar in their fruit through photosynthesis, which converts sunlight to sugar. Adding sugar to the soil will not help this. Plus, it will mostly dissolve and wash out of your soil as soon as you irrigate your newly planted tomato. Instead of sugar, feed your tomato a balanced fertilizer. In addition to using a good fertilizer, choose a tomato variety that is naturally sweeter. The best way to get a sweet tomato is grow it yourself and pick it at the peak of ripeness!

#2 Veggies must have full sun. Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash and eggplant need at least six hours of full sun. But more forgiving veggies can get by with less – in some cases, as little as two hours! If your garden is somewhat on the shady side, try growing beans, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, coriander, leeks, onions, peas, radishes and rutabaga.

#3 Wilting is a sign that it's time to water. Yes, wilting is a sign that the leaves aren't getting enough moisture, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the soil is dry. Anything that damages plant roots can cause wilting. Plant roots need a fairly constant supply of both air and water. Too little water and the roots die from lack of moisture. Too much water and the spaces between soil particles remain filled with water, suffocating roots. Both situations reduce a plant's ability to deliver enough water to stems and leaves, resulting in wilting. Root diseases, physical damage (such as disturbing roots while you're hoeing) and soil-borne insects can also harm roots to the point that they can't fully hydrate the plant. Damage to stems can also cause wilting. Some diseases and insects (especially borers) prevent water distribution throughout the plant, causing some or all of it to wilt. The only way to tell if lack of water is causing wilting is to check the soil moisture.

#4 Compost bins must sit on soil. Worms and micro-organisms in the soil need to have contact with the compost ingredients in order to kick-start decomposition, but while composting directly on grass or soil certainly speeds up the process, it's not essential – compost bins work just as well on a hard surface such as concrete or paving slabs. You can prime a new compost bin by adding some mature compost from another bin. Or add garden soil along with the first batch of ingredients to introduce all those beneficial soil organisms. Worms will successfully make their way into a compost bin sitting on a hard surface. A thick layer of cardboard or newspaper at the base of the bin will help to attract them.

#5 Change potting soil in containers every season. Most experts agree with a growing consensus that discarding potting soil each year is probably overkill for most container plants. A valid and affordable alternative is to simply work in a little compost from year to year to improve the soil structure and provide added nutrients. But if you're growing a rare or cherished plant you'd hate to lose to disease, it's worth the investment to change the potting soil annually.

#6 Gravel helps containers to drain. It is standard practice when filling a container to place stones or pieces of pot at the bottom "for drainage". But the evidence suggests that not only is it a waste of time, but it also restricts plant growth and results in roots sitting in water. You have less space and the drainage is not as good, because water sits above the gravel or the stones. Soil holds moisture better than gravel does. Water will cling to the fine particles in soil until it is completely saturated. Only then does it drain away. As long as there is a hole in the bottom of the container, water will find its way out without the need for stones. The only benefit to putting a piece of crockery in a container is to cover the hole to stop the soil escaping.

#7 Ladybugs are the best predators to release in the garden. Ladybugs feed on vegetable-eating insects like aphids and mites. The problem is, they're predisposed to spread themselves out rather than congregate in a single spot. (Good news for your neighbors, not so helpful for you.)

#8 Eggshells discourage slugs. We are often told that crushed egg shells create an impenetrable barrier to slugs. This may be true if they are laid thickly enough, but consider how many eggs you'd need to eat to protect any more than a couple of plants! Slugs congregate under dark, damp places, so lay planks of wood, stone slabs or upturned grapefruit shells in strategic locations then patrol regularly to collect and destroy them. Or sink small pots filled with beer into the ground – slugs love beer and will drown trying to drink it. You can also raise plants above the ground in wall-mounted containers, or protect crops in pots with copper bands or a barrier of petroleum jelly.

#9 Put kitchen waste into the compost pile. Despite the fact that most people who start a compost pile do it because they think it's the best way to "recycle" greens from the house, putting kitchen waste into an outdoor compost pile is the leading cause of compost failure. There are too many written rules and formulas for composting but there's one basic premise that holds: a compost pile must have more "brown" (carbon) than "green" (nitrogen). Green is the wet and raw stuff, simply put, and brown is the husky dry stuff. And green helps the brown stuff become actual compost. When too much green, which kitchen waste is primarily, the composting system overloads, the oxygen level reaches an anaerobic stage, the wrong decomposers move in and the composting person ends up with wet and stinky, a yard full of flies and animals of all kinds paying a visit at night. And then the neighbors report you. Worst, you get muck instead of useable compost. So what do you do with kitchen wastes? Put them into a vermi-composter (a worm box). NOTE: this often happens, too, when vegetable gardeners throw too much of their left-behinds into a compost pile at any one time. The wet stuff has to be balanced with brown stuff.

#10 Plant potatoes on Good Friday, peas on St Patrick's Day, tomatoes on Mother's Day. An obvious myth because the date for Good Friday varies from year to year, falling anywhere between the 22nd March and the 25th of April. Then of course there's the climate, which varies dramatically depending on where in the world you grow, and your garden's own unique microclimate. The same applies to pea and tomatoes.

Myths about Trees

#1 Stake newly planted trees. It is better not to stake most new trees. Unstaked, they sway slightly in the wind, and that swaying action strengthens the root system and the low trunk. Small trees do not need staking, but stake tall and large trees, especially evergreens. Place stakes parallel to prevailing winds. Use only tree straps around the tree trunk. Wire through the strap's eyelets and attach to the stake. The top of the straps should be at the first major branch or trunk crotch or at about two-thirds the height of the tree. Remove the stakes after the first year. Use pliable material around the trunk and make sure the tree still has a little wiggle room.

#2 When planting a tree or shrub, dig the hole twice as wide and twice as deep as the root-ball. A planting hole should be twice as wide as the root-ball but no deeper. By applying this planting principle, you will encourage the roots of a plant to grow out, which creates stability and allows the plant to readily find water and nutrients. A good way to make sure that the root-ball is at the right depth is to place the top roots so that they are parallel with the soil surface and then apply 2 inches of mulch over them. Think of it as a “planting area,” instead of a “planting hole.”

#3 You should work organic material in a new hole dug for a fruit tree. Incorporating compost for most any tree has long since been shown to be unnecessary and can actually discourage a vigorous root system. The imagined benefits from amending soil stem from the fertilizer component, but nutrient-rich planting holes can give roots less incentive to branch out to absorb nutrients and moisture from the surrounding area. Also keep in mind that compost breaks down and settles, so amended planting holes can end up as low spots. For best results dig a proper planting hole (twice as wide and the same depth as the pot), add a little fertilizer, adjust the pH if you really think you must, and set the new tree a little above the grade.

#4 Don't plant flowers under trees. Flower beds actually can help keep trees healthy. They are also more sustainable than grass in the long run because they require less water. Choose perennials to minimize soil disturbance, and choose the smallest plants possible for the same reason. Carefully work them into the soil that's there, rather than adding dirt for planting.

#5 If a plant is under stress, it should be fed. Fertilizing plants that are not nutrient deficient can lead to additional stress. Fertilizer is added to plants growing in poor soils and to plants that show symptoms of lacking a particular nutrient. Generally, when a plant is stressed, it's not from lack of food. Compacted soil, heat, salt spray, faulty planting, and improper placement are usually the culprits that stress plants. It is important to rule out other environmental conditions before deciding a plant is under fertilized. When fed, stressed plants use up energy that is better spent on growing roots, walling off decay organisms, or defending against insects.

Myths about Soil

#1 Add sand to loosen heavy, clay soil. The worst remedy for a clay soil is to add sand. This practice turns the clay soil into a rock-hard, mortarlike substance. Instead, use organic matter, like compost, to loosen heavy soils because it is light in composition and also improves nutrient quality. Sand can improve a clay soil, but it must be added until it constitutes most of the mineral composition of the soil. At that point, it's not really clay soil any longer; it is sandy soil. Clay soil can be a gardening nightmare. It turns rock-hard when dry, drains badly, takes an age to warm up in spring and is tough to cultivate. However, it holds its nutrients better than most types of soil and, if drainage can be improved, it produces bountiful plants. Soil is a mix of minerals, organic matter, water and air. The balance of those ingredients – and particularly the ratio of sand, silt and clay – affects quality dramatically.

#2 Fertilize the garden as a matter of course. Fact is, almost all plants that we use – or should use -- in our gardens require no fertilizer. Most plants that require any fertilizer require only a bit. What plants truly need to be fed?: Lawns, Container plants, Vegetables, Annual flowers. Unfortunately, most gardeners apply far more fertilizer than plants actually need.

#3 Use topsoil. First, there are no industry standards for what topsoil actually is or should be. Second, topsoil simply put on top of native soil creates what is known as “interfacial soil tension” -- a zone is created where water has a hard time moving and where plants roots have a hard time penetrating.

#4 Till the soil every time you need to re-plant a seasonal flower bed or vegetable garden. Studies have shown that once soil has been properly prepared, it's best to allow it to run its natural course for several years, That gives the soil structure and micro- and macro-organisms a chance to settle down to the business of becoming a healthy, living growing medium. Possibly worse, tilling also brings up buried weed seeds -- the ones you thought couldn't possibly germinate after ten years of being six inches down. It's best to simply mulch the soil heavily between plantings and plant between the mulch come the next season. In a new vegetable bed, however, you do need to start amending. And because you need good soil for vegetables, but it's not a good idea to work in a large quantity of soil all at once, amending (“tilling”) over the course of two or three years might be necessary.

#5 When planting any large plant, the soil should be amended. The belief: making the soil “fluffier” allows for better rooting. Nothing comes closer to the idea of “standard procedure” in the gardening sciences than this old dictum. Considerable research and testing has shown that just about ALL trees, shrubs, perennials, vines, ground covers, and more DO BETTER when planted in native, un-amended soil. The amendments seemed to encourage roots to stay in the vicinity of their planting holes and not grow out into the un-amended soil, leading to stunted root systems. It's best to let the roots begin to grow in the native soil right away and to use organic matter on the surface as a mulch, rather than mixing it with the soil.

Myths about Pesticides and Fertilizing

#1 Organic pesticides are less toxic than synthetic ones. Misused pesticides can be harmful, regardless of whether they are considered natural or synthetic. Whenever possible, it's best to select the least toxic control option available because, even if not lethal, many of these pesticides can cause serious health complications. Safe storage of these products can help prevent any harmful accidents. Read and follow all label directions, and remember that these products are tools, not miracle workers or silver bullets. Pesticides cannot correct mistakes made in selection, installation, maintenance.

Just because a pesticide is organic in origin, doesn't mean it's necessarily harmless. Just like chemical pesticides, many organic substitutes won't discriminate between pests and the beneficial insects eating the pests.

Take the insect killer pyrethrum as an example. While it kills aphids, whiteflies and hungry caterpillars, it also wipes out good insects such as ladybugs and lacewings that would have naturally controlled them. Instead of spraying, work with nature and draw these beneficial bugs to your plot by building an insect hotel.

#2 When it comes to fertilizers and pesticides, if a little is good, twice is better. A precise measurement of these materials is crucial to the health of your garden. Fertilizers can raise salt levels in the soil to toxic levels, burning the roots and stunting growth of your plants. Pesticides, when overused, can also have similar detrimental effects on plants by burning the leaves or raising toxicity levels in the soil. Garden products, both organic and synthetic, are extensively tested during research and development to provide safe and reliable results, so using the exact recommended dosage is the best practice.

#3 Routinely douse plants with pesticides when there aren't any pests in sight. Pesticides should never be used as **preventive** sprays, especially the broad-spectrum products that claim to kill anything that moves. A little damage isn't likely to spell disaster for the plant, but more importantly, if you spray pesticides all over, you'll wind up killing both the good and the bad bugs. If given the chance, good bugs do a fine job of keeping the bad bugs in check. Spraying too often and aimlessly also encourages pesticide resistance in key pests.

#4 Use Vitamin B1 with transplants to “prevent transplant shock.” The simple fact is that Vitamin B1 is thiamine. Plants make their own thiamine, and thiamine does not stimulate root growth. Faced with this evidence, savvy manufacturers added other things to their “transplant treatments” in order to sell them to unsuspecting gardeners. It is true that certain plant hormones increase the number of roots or enhance lateral root growth. These may also suppress the growing top of the plant, allowing the plant to use internal resources for root production but slowing leafy growth. Nitrogen can improve growth of both tops and roots. A small amount of plant food in the planting hole will make more difference than anything else you can add.

Myths about Lawn and Landscape

#1 Native and well-adapted plants are much better and much more environmentally sustainable” for home landscaping purposes. The truth here is both yes and no. Both native and well-adapted plants include those from a wide range of soil types and rainfall patterns. Some are very fussy, others are very tough. Believe me, “site considerations should always dictate plant selection.” Drainage, irrigation, and the site usage are the most important things to think about.

#2 Buy plants on impulse hoping to find a place for them in the garden later. The number one key to successful, problem-free, sustainable gardening and landscaping is the concept of “Right Plant, Right Place”. That means that you have a definable place – the environment. You have a distinct climate, a measurable sun exposure, a discernible soil type and a measurable space. As a good gardener who wants a plant to survive and thrive, your job is to find a plant that matches those criteria. One that adapts to the space. Buying a square peg for what turns out to be a round hole is a problem.

#3 Believe that just because the nursery sells it, it must grow here. Almost all large-scale garden centers and even most smaller independent nurseries (no longer actually that, because they don’t actually grow things for you) do not buy most of their plant material from “local” or even “regional” wholesalers. Plant material comes from all over the country. With the larger garden centers, plant materials are often distributed through a hub or, to match demand, consolidated from wholesalers who have growing grounds throughout the country. The semi-smart retailers don’t just take whatever the wholesaler wants to sell them. They often buy and sell what they think their customers want or what their customers tell them they want. That includes hostas, peonies, lilacs, sweet cherries and many other magazine cover favorites that simply don’t grow well here.

#4 Full-sun plants grow only in full sun. Ask six gardeners to define full sun and you might get six different answers. Some experts define it as at least six hours of unfiltered sun between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., but recommend that gardeners experiment with inexpensive plants to see if they can push the boundaries. Some have had success planting “full-sun” flowers in spots that get less than three hours of direct sun, with filtered sun in the afternoon. The plants are healthy, although they’re shorter and sport fewer blooms than a neighbor’s specimens that get much more light.

#5 Plucking or spraying dandelions is the best way to keep them out of your lawn and garden. It is true that plucking out the dandelions will work, at least for a short time, so feel free to yank dandelions out of your yard. But the cold hard fact is that the seeds will find their way back eventually; there are far too many of them blowing around. Your best chance at keeping them from growing is to focus on growing a thick, healthy lawn or lush garden so that the dandelion seeds can’t easily sow. Then, you might want to encourage them to grow keeping in mind that they were a reliable and healthy food source for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Myths about Watering

#1 Xeriscape plants don't need water. All plants need water! It's true that xeriscape, or xeric plants (those that have low water needs,) can almost take care of themselves once they are established. All new plants have small root systems that need sufficient moisture for at least the first year. For these dry-loving plants, a soaker hose or drip system is a good way to keep moisture at the root zone while the plant gets going, without getting the foliage too wet.

#2 Sunshine focused through water droplets will burn leaves. The diffused rays of the sun are not powerful enough to cause burning. If it were the case that water droplets burned leaves, farmers would encounter huge losses after each daytime rainstorm. In fact, lawn care professionals often cool turf by spritzing water over the foliage during the hottest part of the day. In general, the best time to water most garden plants is early in the morning because of higher municipal water pressure, a lower evaporation rate, and the potential to reduce foliar diseases that often occur in overly moist situations. But if you are left with no other choice, watering midday will not harm your plants.

#3 Garden plants, trees, shrubs and lawns need 1 inch of water per week. Although the "inch-a-week" recommendation is often cited as a rule of thumb, the truth is that plants vary widely in their water needs. Young seedlings and new transplants have limited root systems and need a consistent supply of moisture, so they may need daily watering if the weather is sunny and hot. Established trees, shrubs, and lawns on the other hand, may need supplemental watering only during extended dry spells because they have more extensive root systems. The amount of water a plant needs depends on a number of factors, including the type of plant, its stage of growth, type of soil, weather and time of year. The best way to water most plants is by applying enough to moisten the plant's entire root system, and then letting the soil dry out slightly before watering again. Apply water slowly so it's absorbed by the soil rather than running off.

#4 It is bad to water plants after the sun has gone down or near dusk. This is really not too big of an issue, and one advantage is that you can conserve water because of less evaporation as there is no sunshine. A major disadvantage is that the sunshine can't help dry out plant leaves that get wet. This can be an issue because some plants don't like cold and wet foliage. These conditions can foster blight on tomatoes for example. So if you're watering in the evening, don't spray the foliage. Use a soaker hose or another irrigation technique that targets the roots instead of the foliage. Generally speaking, early morning is a good time to water. Anything that gets on the foliage will dry up with the sun and you're less prone to disease and fungi.

#5 No matter where you plant something, particularly a big tree, its roots will grow to where the water is. Plant roots grow in moist soil. They must have water to grow. They do not grow where there is no moisture and they do not have some kind of "radar" or "sense" to find moisture. Saying that plant roots "seek, look, or search for water" is to think the plant is human. In other words, plant roots grow where you put the water.