

## Gardening Myths by Norm DeNeal

“Truth, often a rare thing, seems even more elusive as one advances with experience in gardening.” One of the first realizations of many is that the enchanting displays of seed packets in retail outlets and the offerings of seed catalogs are often ill suited to Montana growing conditions. The assumption is that these reputable companies would only market selections suitable to the location where they are sold. What is true is that seed selections in stores are quickly picked over by knowledgeable gardeners leaving everyone else with less favored results. Problems with the market are multiplied with mail order companies that tout live plants. Most misleading are those who market with drawn illustrations rather than photographs; the artist exaggerates as much as the wordsmith. A good rule of thumb is to buy locally, and even that carries a caveat, since local ware for Montana are often imported from Washington or Oregon...climates far different from ours. Thus the best one can do is to draw from the success of other local gardeners and suspend the claims of marketplace.

It seems too that the advice and business of landscape gardening is fraught with rules that proclaim time-tested truths. Again, nearly everything declared turns out not only to have a myriad of exceptions, but also comes out to be relative rather than absolute. Every period of history (often only a decade) has its fashion; a fad seen as silly by others a few years later. Plant combinations, and especially color combinations are at best guides, and often pure nonsense. Drawing up plans of garden beds showing the location of every plant is usually a dreamer's waste of time. Actual digging and planting has time-tested reliability. But what should be remembered in landscape planning is to avoid cheesiness and reach for the best quality one can achieve. Thus, for example, chain link fences, plastic ornaments and store-bought ponds are usually to be avoided. But for Montana with its long winters, a landscape truism of reaching for architectural garden structure with shaped shrubs, colored winter bark and branches, and quality ornaments that are winter proof is advice worth noting.

Inexperienced gardeners often favor perennials. After all, it's easier to set a plant once rather than start from scratch each year, or so goes the reasoning. Actually, experience soon proves that perennials usually require as much maintenance as annuals. Furthermore, if one is striving for garden color, annuals are sometimes a better choice. While most flowering plants (annuals, biennials, and perennials) have a bloom period of only three to six weeks, some annuals, particularly so-called “bedding plants” have flowering that starts in spring and continues to a hard frost. No Montana perennial that comes to mind has this quality. The rule of thumb is to choose plants for their individual qualities rather than the length of their life span. Additionally, if one is planting in a garden with new unsterilized compost or manure, annuals are the only practical choice until weeds are brought under control...usually a period of at least a year. Weeding, which often occupies the majority of one's gardening energy is considerably easier among annuals than among perennials, which are often best destroyed if the weed is entwined within the perennial's root structure.

Organic gardening rather than chemical use is preferred. It appears that man has not yet triumphed over the processes of nature. Renewing soil with yard and garden debris is preferable over the easy chemical fertilizer fix. Yet it remains that for heavy feeding plants such as delphiniums and sweet peas, chemical fertilizers can work miracles. The disadvantage of using chemical fertilizers is usually associated with poor

draining soils that can have a quick chemical salt buildup that can render the soil useless. Organics buffer acidity, alkalinity and disease. But with the exception of manures, organic material supplies little nutrition that lasts over a year. The advantage of adding organics is to improve the quality of soils to retain moisture, fight disease and hold nutrients. With regard to pests, both organic and chemical measures are usually unnecessary if the soil is healthy. But if pests or disease does occur, the chemical measures available to the unlicensed public are safe when moderately used. It should be noted that chemical nitrogen will measurably quicken the decay of mulch to a useable compost...a fact useful to Montana since usually a year of warm weather (which Montana does not have) is required to transform mulch to compost. Still it remains that most of your mulch mixed with dirt will break down on its own in under a year without chemical nitrogen. Also note that grass clippings should be mixed with other garden debris or with dirt to effectively become compost. This is because of the extreme density of grass clippings. Also pulled weeds, if they have not gone to seed, make excellent compost. If the weeds have gone to seed, it is advised that they eventually be buried deep enough so they will not be disturbed for several years.

Low maintenance gardening is something of an illusion. While some gardening techniques require less work, there is probably no method of gardening that is labor free. Furthermore, the more work one puts into a landscape, usually the better are the results by a geometric factor. Lazy usually equates with lackluster.

In short, the above notions have been nourished by reams of magazines, books and some academic experts who have had a fairly consistent record of cultivating illusion. If there is a gardening truth in Montana, it is the result of sweat and direct experience of both success and failure, and not the musings of the "truth" in the written word. And, for the sake of consistency, it is assumed that you even consider these words with a degree of skepticism.