

"GardenTalk", a regular feature for The Gazette, brings to you the combined experience and expertise of Holly Lake's dedicated gardeners and others. A continuing focus will be subjects of interest to anyone who has ever bought a packet of seeds or dug a hole in the ground for a plant, as well as the dedicated and sharp-eyed observers of nature. "GardenTalk" will not only inform you each issue but solicits your ideas and personal gardening experiences which you may wish to pass on to others. The hope is that "GardenTalk" will enrich us all as well as help make Holly Lake even more beautiful.

It is January 3 and Rick and I have just spent the morning kayaking Holly Lake - can you believe it is January??? Hellooo, Mark Scirto, I need some cold, dreary weather. A true gardener relishes the cold weather as much as the seasons for growing. This is the time that a gardener will sit by the fire, hot cocoa in hand, perusing the gardening catalogs and dreaming of gardens abloom this summer.

Gardening catalogs are particularly convenient when you are pressed for time or limited by distance. And, if you find a source that handles plants adapted to our east Texas conditions, the costs generally outweigh those of the big box stores. Garden catalogs that cite species by zones, sunlight and water conditions and resistance to pests are extremely reliable. Therefore, what you purchase should grow in our area. If not, many companies have guarantees. The initial cost will be more than the big box store but you can't beat the ease of an adapted plant being delivered to your door.

Here are some tips when ordering on-line or by catalog:

Order early for availability. Track your order (you don't want to be gone on an extended holiday when your plants are delivered). Use only one or two companies and order as much as you can from these two companies. Shipping charges can add up!! Prepare your beds ahead of time or have a place to nurse your seedling until it is time to put into the ground. Find a neighbor so that you can split the order. Some companies offer discounts for larger orders. Save ordering info, shipping info and tags or information that accompanies a plant. Keep a journal to document plant growth. A good web site where gardeners post personal experiences with mail order companies is www.davesgarden.com/products/gwd.

This year you might want to try an independent garden center, which is more familiar with landscape conditions in our area and can provide suggestions for planting a sustainable landscape. A sustainable landscape is one that is planted with awareness of surroundings (sun, shade, soil, etc.) and plants (native and adapted), is composted freely and watered once a week or less. The big box stores sell plants to get you inside the store to buy high-dollar items and yes, they do sell native and adapted plants. Your choice!

Now, here is where you say, "but Ann, we live at Holly Lake. We have shade, sugar sand, deer and a lot of rain." There are resources out there that will recommend plants adapted for our area. Sometimes gardeners have to be willing to change their idea of what a garden is. One idea is a fern dell. A fern dell is an extremely beautiful type of shade garden. There are many ferns with different color foliage, different texture, varying leaf shape, upright or cascading growth and that are well suited for our area. This type of garden makes a lovely vista.

How about a rain garden? Rain gardens are slight depressions in the soil, usually a few yards in diameter, filled with native plants that take advantage of rainfall and storm water runoff in design. Rain gardens are sited ideally close to the source of the runoff and serve to slow the storm water as it travels downhill, giving the water more time to infiltrate and less opportunity to gain momentum and erosive power. Plants should be chosen that are generally suited to our location, moisture and exposure requirements. Some plants that won't give up when it rains are:

bee balm cardinal flower, blue-eyed grass, threadleaf coreopsis, purple coneflower, goldenrod, Russian sage, blazing star, and switch grass.

Another idea for a moist area is a bog. The big difference between a pond and a bog garden is a pond contains standing water while a bog garden is just wet ground, so the conditions suit different plants. However, it's not just the degree of wetness that's different. Pond plants need a low-nutrient environment with as little organic matter as possible, whereas bog plants like quite the reverse, with lots of nutrients and all the organic matter they can get. So although a pond and a bog garden are natural partners, they provide very different habitats.

And then there is the plain old shade garden. To create a shade garden in our area, you will need to add at least 2-3 inches of humus (compost) to the soil. Since the shade garden requires less irrigation, you might want to consider a drip irrigation system or use soaker hoses. Choose shade plants that are texturally pleasing. Variegated foliage provides contrast. Combine different textures to create a tapestry. Pair broad, bold leafed species with lacy leafed varieties. Trees with varying shade of bark and bark pattern are also interesting to the eye and provide different shade patterns during the day. There are all sorts of grasses and sedges that provide movement in the garden. To weave more interest into the garden, plant natives or perennials in the "puddles" of sunlight.

So there you have some ideas to ponder during the cold winter month of January. Peruse the catalogs; plan your garden, dream of butterflies and sing along with me, "Doing the garden, digging the weeds, who could ask for more? Will you still need me; will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?" The Beatles, 1967.

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