



Ok – so current drought issues aside, do you have relatively healthy plants? If you don't know the answer to that question, then your plants could probably be a bit healthier. Let's take a look at good, basic health considerations that result in healthier plants.

It cannot be said often enough – know the plants and your planting site before you whip out the paper or plastic to make your plant and garden purchases. It is impossible to know what a healthy plant should look like or where it should be placed unless you know the optimal growth environment for, and characteristics of, any plant. Knowing the characteristics will help you to place any plant in your landscape correctly, minimizing some of the potential environmental stresses. Why does that matter? Think about it – when are you happiest? When the temperature and weather are good, when you have enough to eat and drink, and when you are comfortable in your environment – either at work or at home. All of these things are as subjectively important to plants as they are to each individual human. Providing appropriate environmental conditions for optimal plant growth helps the plant perform well in both leaf health and flower production. Use some of the fantastic resources out there and do a bit of research on the plants that you find interesting – before you purchase. What color or shade of green are leaves supposed to be? Flowers happen when and look like what? Is the plant supposed to turn brown and die in August (yes, some actually do that when they are healthy)? Knowing what a healthy plant looks like helps us make good decisions during the purchasing stage (no, you don't want to buy a sick plant) but also makes us happy when we get them home too.

A few basic plant health issues that gardeners need to consider are soil and water pH levels, and soil type and moisture. (It is a good idea to have a qualified lab run a thorough test on your soil every few years but during the interim years, you can purchase and use quality test kits to keep up with basic soil information.) In this part of the glacial remnant world, we have pH readings that can range anywhere from 5 (and lower) to 8.5 (and higher). Purchasing a good pH test kit will allow you to check levels in specific areas of your landscape as well as the water source. This is especially important if you are planning to purchase a plant (or plants) that may need some soil amendments to change the pH level – blueberries, rhododendrons or azaleas, and holly to name a few.

Soil types can change from one square foot to another and our soils can be anywhere from wet clay to dry gravel.

Know whether your soils have very small particulates (clay types) with slow absorption rates or soils with larger particles (sandy loam to gravel) that are well drained. If you don't know what type of soil you have – check with your local governmental unit to find out where soil information or maps are kept. Choose plants that will live well in the soils that you have. To check the soil drainage, dig a hole about 15" deep, fill it with water and watch to see how long it takes to absorb – do remember to call digger's hotline before you dig. (Keep in mind that we under drought conditions so you may want to wait until we have a bit of normal weather before doing this test to get a more accurate reflection of normal absorption rates.) While some moisture conditions can be mechanically replicated by adding water through irrigation or reducing water through manmade drainage, it might just be easier, and less expensive, to choose plant material that lives happily in the existing soil and under normal moisture conditions.

A big environmental factor that affects all of our landscapes is the degree of sun and/or shade present throughout the day. Often when we look around our yards, we use a very limited time frame to "snap the picture" of sun or shade. As the earth rotates throughout the day, the levels and locations of the intensities of sun and shade will change. My suggestion is to pick a nice, sunny day and get a comfortable chair, beverage(s) of choice, and notebook; get comfortable and monitor the changes in sun and shade around the yard throughout the day. Use that notebook to write down and/or sketch out where the boundaries of light are falling and the approximate level of intensity – dappled to deep shade, bright to filtered sun. The next time you look at a plant tag, you will have a better understanding of the sun and shade situation and intensity when looking for appropriate plants.

Unless you know your environmental characteristics, it will only be by chance that you appropriately choose plants that will thrive within the confines of your landscape. And it is important to choose wisely. You can save money on unnecessary replacement plants, instead - spend it on new plant choices. You will have a greater sense of satisfaction as the survival and thrive rate increases and you will, of course, be the envy of the neighborhood with your glorious yard. How fantastic is that?