

It's summer and that means it's time for more planting and general garden maintenance, so here are some tips to help you along.

Go native

South Africa is a country blessed with a vast range of indigenous plants and they should be the first choice for your garden, wherever you live. Why? Because plants that are indigenous to your area are already adapted to living and thriving in your region.

One thing to bear in mind when planting an indigenous garden is that what is suited to a particular area just a few kilometres away might not be suitable for your particular area. You will also want to remember that plants that are indigenous to your particular area generally require far less care and attention than do those that need help to thrive.

Food for thought

Given the fact that food is one of the biggest household expenses, something you might consider – if you have not already done so – is devoting part of your garden to vegetables and/or herbs.

Group activities

If you are thinking of a garden makeover, or simply planting more shrubs, flowers and what-have-you, it's a good idea to group your plants according to their water needs. You can achieve attractive results using plants with different foliage, and obviously, different flower colours. Grouping them by their water needs means that you are less likely to over-water or under-water any of them.

This principle is similar to what you would do when planting according to the amount of light your plants need – full sun varieties go out together in the sun, semi-shade plants in other areas and so on.

For the birds

One of the most common concerns gardeners have is the insect pest that plagues their gardens. As with many issues affecting the garden, it's best to try and find an environmentally friendly solution whenever possible. Hang up bird feeders and nesting boxes in your garden to attract birds. They are among the most efficient consumers of insects and will help control the insect population in your garden while saving you a fortune on insecticides.

Mulch much?

Wood chips spread over your garden beds help you to conserve valuable water, so investing in a shredder is a good idea. Your local Mica will be sure to be able to obtain one for you. When pruning back trees and shrubs, shred the cuttings and use it as mulch. In time, they will break down and enrich the soil, and in the meantime, they will help keep the soil moist.

You can also try sprinkling lawn cuttings (but not stems) over the beds in the same way after having mown the lawn, but the shredded route is probably the best option whereas lawn cuttings can be added to your compost bin.

Nail those snails

Mica is the bane of many a garden's existence. Mica stocks a range of fantastic snail bait, but there are other ways of controlling them.

The first might be a bit quacky, but ducks love snails.

Another measure is a bit more fun for the snails who at least go to snail heaven reasonably happy – beer! Snails love beer. Just fill a jar halfway with flat beer and put it where your biggest snail problem is. They will come to the party, fall in the beer and... well, you know the rest. Hic!

Code yellow

Some species of beetles and problem insects are attracted to yellow – which often means that they burrow into the yellow heads of your flowers and before you know it your yellow flowerbeds are bare.

You can foil them, however, by putting a large yellow or orange basin of water near the plants. Many of the problem insects and beetles will be attracted to it, thinking this is a flower banquet rather than your flowers and fall in with predictable results.

Water, water everywhere

If you have paving, chances are you have a perpetual battle with weeds and other unwanted plants growing up between the slabs or bricks. Usually we end up on our hands and knees trying to dig the offenders out.

Here's an easier method – boiling water.

Boil some water and pour the contents onto the offending plants. The hot water penetrates down to the roots and kills off the weeds, which will then wither and turn brown in a day or so.

You can enhance the efficiency of this method by either making up a boiling salt-water mix. A couple tablespoons of salt in a litre of boiling water will do the trick. If you're concerned with conserving water, you can skip the water and just pour salt over the offending plants or moss. Salt is hygroscopic (it attracts moisture), so it gradually dissolves and seeps down to the roots, killing off the weed.

A hot idea

Another idea, simply burn away weeds and grass in paving with a LPG blowtorch, available from your local Mica.

Sheet!

Sandy soils don't usually hold water that long, but you can slow down the rate of moisture loss and give plants more time to absorb it.

Dig out the bed and line it with 250 micron black plastic – available at your local Mica – and then prepare the bed just as you usually would, but this time by first putting down a 25-40mm layer of coarse gravel – also available from your local Mica store. Then complete the preparation of the bed by adding the potting soil or whatever soil you are using. Essentially, what you have created is a sunken plastic-lined trough.

Now comes the tricky part. Water must be able to drain away, otherwise the plants will probably drown. Water the bed and over the course of a day or so, and using a moisture meter to establish the optimum number of holes you need to make in the bottom of the bed with a garden fork or spike. Water, make a few holes at first, check the result and then make a few more if you notice the bed is still too wet.

This is only really suitable for smaller plants, such as marigolds and others that will not have deep roots.

Protecting those plants

- Protect plant stems when using trimmer by placing a spade between the stem and the trimmer line.
- Stop cutworm by carefully removing soil around a plant stem and wrapping the stem lightly in tinfoil to a depth of 50mm or so, and then packing the soil back around the foil-clad stem.
- When spraying chemicals, wear eye and mouth protection, spray on a calm day (so the spray goes where you want it to go and not all over the place), use a plastic garbage bag or plastic sheet to cover plants when spraying.

Keep those weeds in check

The moment you see a weed, pull it out; the longer it stays in the ground, the stronger it gets and the more nutrients it will take up – nutrients that you would rather go to your plants. You will also give them a greater opportunity to develop seed heads.

- When you remove a seed head, take care to prevent any seeds falling off or being blown elsewhere into your garden.

- Having pulled out a weed, shake the soil off the roots; it will reduce the chances of the weed recovering.
- Weeds left on the ground can re-root, so put them into a plastic bag or wheelie bin for disposal.
- Once you have cleared the ground of weeds, lay down a layer of mulch over the surface; not only will you deter other weeds from growing, but you will also help the soil to conserve moisture.

Clean those garden tools

Rusted tools can be cleaned by rubbing them with a soap-filled steel pad, soaked in paraffin. Then cover the tools, particularly the cutting edge, with a thin coating of petroleum jelly.

Happy gardening!