



What Not to Plant

Gary Westlake

Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners

So many of the articles on gardening in the newspapers and in magazines tell you what plants you might like to try in your garden. For a change I am going to give you some advice on what not to plant.

The most important thing not to plant is nothing. Very often a gardener will clear an area for a garden bed and then think for a while about what to plant in it. The problem with this approach is that Nature has other plans for that space. By the time you have poured your coffee, alarms have already gone off in Nature's control room 'Bare Ground! Bare Ground! Send Weeds!' Just the act of digging the garden bed has uncovered many seeds of unwanted plants, giving them just the conditions they need to start a new life.

In a recent study of the city's trees by Peterborough GreenUp, it was found that one tree dominates our urban landscape. The Norway Maple accounts for most of our trees. In addition to the regular green, it has red, bronze and variegated disguises. In all its varieties, it is a weed that blocks the sun, sucks all the moisture from the soil, seeds prolifically, is usually too big for the location, and belongs somewhere else, perhaps Norway. We are setting ourselves up for the Maple equivalent of Dutch Elm disease which is what happened when we lined our streets with Elm Trees many years ago. Some disease or insect is bound to come along to wipe out all our maples.

Now that you know that Norway Maples are bad trees, please do not plant any more of them.

Your garden is a place where you can plant things that please you, an oasis from the world where you can do just about anything you would like to do with the space. This unfortunately runs into problems when there are two gardeners in the family. For the most part, my wife Dianne and I agree on plant choices, but our tastes are different when it comes to a few things. For example, Dianne likes Sedum 'Frosty Morn' or as I call it 'Floppy Morn'. It is a tall sedum with white variegation and it has a tendency to fall over just as it reaches its prime. I am not particularly

fond of it and am not shy about suggesting to her that it belongs in the compost. Sometimes, it flops over on the lawn and gets in the way of lawn cutting. If some of it gets sucked into the blades, It is not really my fault right?

It is a good idea not to buy something for planting in your garden when you have no idea where it is going to go. Every year, we have what we call 'Plants in Waiting' under our carport. These plants come from various sources: spring plant sales, gifts from friends and family, and just interesting varieties that we did not have the will power to leave in the nursery. We usually do not have a clear idea where we will put them, so they wait. Often we go through a whole season with at least something unplanted. When we have visitors tour our garden, there is sometimes a scramble to clear the area.

If you do not enjoy spending a lot of time gardening, you might not want to plant things that are a lot of trouble. True lilies (not daylilies) are wonderful but when you plant them you are taking on the dreaded lily leaf beetle. It takes regular inspection and squishing to keep your lilies from becoming defoliated sticks. If you plant euphorbia, coneflower, rudbeckia or allium, you can expect to deal with their offspring popping up in unwanted locations. So if you cannot afford the time to deadhead, stick to something easier. Similarly if you have plants that travel like periwinkle, lily-of-the-valley, or goutweed you will spend time keeping them under control. If you choose plants that belong in North Carolina, you will have to work babying them through the winter.

Plant collectors (we are card-carrying members) need to show some restraint as well. For many plants, the plant breeders are constantly creating new varieties which you will have to have. The numbers are staggering so you will never get a complete collection and you will drive yourself crazy if you try. We stopped counting above 200 varieties of Hosta in our garden. Here is a hint, if you have a similar affliction. If you cannot tell the difference between two varieties of Hosta from 15 feet away, then you do not need both of them. This suggestion is not a usually followed by all members of our gardening team.

We all are attracted to the exotic plants that are bred for their colour or their foliage but there is a danger in importing plants from other locations or plants that are bred for vigour or insect and disease resistance. Some day these plants might escape to the wild where they can cause trouble. Purple loosetrife was one of these escapees from gardens. Its insect resistance, that made it a desirable plant in the garden was its problem in the wild where it had no natural enemies to keep it in check. It is a good idea to start thinking of planting more native plants and fewer exotics.

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner