

in the garden BY STEPHEN AND KRISTIN PATEGAS



We See Dead Plants

By Stephen and Kristin Pategas

As we do garden consultations, drive through neighborhoods, or visit with friends, we often see struggling, dying, and dead plants that need some TLC or should be replaced. Do other people see them? Do we have a super power that others don't?



We are not gardening in the tropics!

Perhaps it's a matter of knowing what a healthy plant should look like. That takes experience and knowing what conditions plants require to thrive. So why do plants fail and die? As living entities they have some basic needs that must be fulfilled:

Grow in their Zone - The USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map shows Central Florida is in Zone 9b (not North Florida's 8 or Miami's 10). The average annual minimum temperatures for Zone 9b are 25 to 30 degrees, so 2010's January and December lows of 27 degrees were within the range. Know the Zone for a plant unless you are willing to gamble. Sometimes finding a micro-climate with a winter-protected southern exposure or summer shade may stretch the Zones a bit.

Have the proper soil conditions - Soil conditions can vary widely across one property. Rarely are the natural soils still in place. Often sites are filled with soil from off-site or the topsoil is scraped away and never replaced. Debris is buried and the soil is compacted from construction. Invisible to the eye is the soil contamination from paint, solvents, and pH-changing concrete. Concrete debris, usually in abundance next to walls, is alkaline and raises the soil pH. Acid-loving plants such as hollies and azaleas would suffer if planted there. Soil tests are recommended.

Get the right amount of light - Shade loving plants need...shade. Scorched leaves mean it's the wrong plant for that location. Sometimes new growth will adjust to the higher light levels but the plant may consistently need more water. Spindly plants need either more light or nutrients.

Have the proper nutrients to grow - We feed ourselves, children, and pets regularly, don't we? Plants need nutrients to stay healthy and grow. Provide a three-to-four inch layer of organic mulch which slowly decomposes and releases nitrogen. Plants lacking nitrogen have stunted growth and older leaves turn yellowish while newer leaves use up the limited nitrogen. Phosphorous levels are usually adequate in our Florida soils.

Receive the right amount of water - Staying hydrated is a challenge for us in the summer heat and that is true for plants as well. Plant roots need moisture to move nutrients into the stems and leaves. Sandy soils drain water and nutrients away quickly and mucky soils stay soggy longer. Roots also need oxygen, so water-logged soils can drown a plant.

Keep diseases and pests at bay - Cold damage; improper planting, watering, or pruning; incorrect light levels; or a lack of nutrients will all weaken a plant. Keep your plants healthy by growing them in the proper conditions and they will usually resist diseases and withstand attacks from pests.

Right plant in the right place with the proper planting (planting too deep will cause decline) and regular care is the mantra to follow to develop healthy living plants in the landscape. Save the super powers for a real crisis.

Please join us February 17th at Harry P. Leu Gardens for our "Contain It! Color and Drama in Container Gardening" program. Registration required, please call 407-246-2620. ■



Construction compromises the soil unless it is removed. Below, properly selected, planted, and maintained plants thrive in this garden.

