

Gardening Tips from Those Who've Been There

BLOOMFIELD, CT, June 24, 2008 -- Long-time gardeners have developed their own tips and tricks that often aren't found in books. Do marigolds really repel bugs? Does it matter when you water? And how do you get more string beans from a single bush? The veteran gardeners from the Duncaster Community Garden have the years of experience and dirt under their nails to answer these and other questions.

The Community Garden was something the original founders of Duncaster insisted upon when this lifecare community was built almost 25 years ago. "One of the founders of Duncaster, Mrs. Woodruff, said there had to be a garden when they originally envisioned this community. She found the spot on the grounds and that's where it's been ever since," says Duncaster resident and yearly patron of the Community Garden, Susan Gorton. "So many of our residents had gardens in their homes before they moved here and they didn't want to give up that passion when they moved to a lifecare community. In my case, I really believe my husband wouldn't have moved to Duncaster if he couldn't garden."

Located on the community's 87 acre campus, Duncaster's Community Garden consists of 30 parcels that any resident is free to use. The community has an expanding number of veteran gardeners using the land. Some plant flowers. Others cultivate vegetables. There is also one perennial flower bed, called the Duncaster Bed, which is reserved for a group of residents who cultivate and arrange all of the flowers for the halls and tables of Duncaster.

With that many experienced gardeners working the land, you're bound to pick up a few pieces of advice that you can use to improve your garden's yield and look. Here are a few:

- **Pick the plant for the location** – "The biggest mistake people make is falling in love with a plant in the nursery without considering where it will end up in their garden," says Susan Gorton, who says gardening is in her blood and part of her husband's family history – his father was a professional florist. "Once you get those plants home, you end up putting sun-loving plants in the shade because that's what you've got. Most flowering plants don't do well in the shade. If you have no sunny places, ask for help at the gardening center so you bring home the right plants."
- **Plant at the right time** – There is an optimum time for planting and it's right now. "Do not plant too early," cautions Norma Granville, who moved to Duncaster about a year ago and says she came to gardening late in life. "It's a big mistake to planting too early. I don't put out my flats before Memorial Day."

- **Give plants room to grow** – “Don’t put your plants too close together,” says Mrs. Gorton. “Crowding retards their growth and they don’t get the air, sun and root space they need. If the tag on the plant says leave 12 to 18 inches, do it.”
- **Use natural fertilizers** – The Community Garden at Duncaster does not allow artificial fertilizers. “We use compost that we make ourselves, using vegetable material like leaves and grass clippings, egg shells, coffee grounds and even weeds pulled from the gardens,” says Mrs. Gorton. “Those who created these gardens started the original compost pile we still use today. In addition, many of the residents use the composting tumblers near the garden to recycle their plant waste. I also keep a composting tumbler in my home so I can use my food scraps to fertilize my garden naturally.”
- **Keep it loose** – “It’s a mistake to pack down the soil too much,” says Mrs. Granville. “When you put in your plants, make sure the earth around the plant is somewhat loose. That way, when it rains, it’s easier for it to reach the roots. You can pack the soil well when you put the plant in the hole but then build up the soil around the plant and keep that soil loose.”
- **Keep them company** – The Community Gardeners at Duncaster are big fans of a technique called “companion planting.” This approach involves planting two or more plant species close together to control pests and/or increase yield. Mrs. Gorton, for example, alternates rows of tomatoes with marigolds to repel bugs. Other companion crops include pairing carrots with rosemary; cucumbers with sunflowers and lettuce with carrots.
- **Water in the early evening** – These veteran gardens caution against watering during the height of the day. “Water in the early evening— not when the sun is at its highest, or it will actually dry out the plants,” advises Mrs. Granville.
- **Avoid overwatering** – For established plants, Mrs. Gorton suggests leaving them alone and not watering unless there’s a draught. “A lot of people water just the surface. That encourages the plant to develop shallow roots. Leave established plants alone and their roots will go down and seek water on their own. In the end, those will be deep and hearty.” For new plants, she advises digging a hole and putting the water into the hole and then putting the plant in. “Make sure the root ball is wet right to the top,” she says. Once in the ground, these new plants should be watered daily for ten days.

- **Cater to those tomatoes** – For tomatoes, the gardeners had some special tips. These include planting them deep enough that the soil reaches almost to the top of the first leaves and pinching back vines to create fuller plants.
- **Pick green beans often** – To encourage a bumper crop of string beans, don't let the bushes get too full of beans. "If you pick them often, you'll get more," says Mrs. Granville.
- **Watch weather-sensitive cucumbers** - Cucumbers don't like the cold so Mrs. Gorton advises waiting until the weather's consistently warm during both the night and the day for planting and watering. And keep a close eye on them. "We put fences around our cucumber plants to contain them, so they don't take over the garden," she says.

All of the Duncaster Community Gardens encourage people to get out in the soil and take some risks in their plantings. "You learn from experience," says Mrs. Gorton. "Don't be afraid to fail. If worse comes to worse, you can pull out what's not working and try something else. The point is to get out there and enjoy the sun, soil and fruits of your labor."

About Duncaster

Duncaster is Bloomfield's signature life care retirement community. This campus includes 190 independent residences, assisted living and the Caleb Hitchcock Health Center that is designed to provide a lifestyle of security and fulfillment. Aquatic and fitness center activities, ongoing education and a myriad of social and cultural programs energize and enrich residents' lives. For more information, see www.duncaster.org or call (860) 380-5005.
