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SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

Turning Green Thumbs Up on Winter

Winter + garden = oxymoron? Not as Master Gardener Helen Kensinger sees it, looking out on her own Maplewood garden in cold, gray January.

"Winter is the time to appreciate your garden in different ways, " she says. "Non-gardeners often focus on flowers, but winter is break time. No weeding, no mowing.

This is the time to relax and observe your garden...to notice the way the light changes, to look at the structure of shrubs and see the colorful bark and lacy patterns of the bare trees."

Observant eyes are as important as green thumbs, Helen tells her gardening students at the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School (she will be teaching "Garden Design: Planning for Spring," March 3 - 24; somadultschool.org). But don't expect just the usual discussion of soil, seeds, and such.

"I teach people to see plants differently, to look at their structure, to appreciate their beauty, year 'round," Helen promises. Her aesthetic approach is informed, no doubt, by her earlier career as a photo editor in New York's publishing world. "My first garden was on a roof in the City," she tells. "I was growing a collection of topiary roses on the blacktop."

That interest in gardening, well, grew on her, leading to a year of study at Rutgers and 100 hours of volunteer work to earn the title of Master Gardener. Next came studies in landscape design at the NY Botanical Garden, leading to her own business, Kensinger Garden Design, based in Maplewood.

Her best professional advice for beginning gardeners? "A number of my students have just moved here, many from city apartments. They have this patch of grass and don't know where to begin. They also want to know what kind of a garden is appropriate for the architecture of their home.

"The first thing I tell them is, *Wait!* Live with the garden you have throughout the seasons. Then work with the bones of that garden. Don't start from scratch. It can be overwhelming -- and expensive! Besides, the previous owner may have left some surprises for you -- like bulbs that will bloom in the spring."

A common mistake: beginners often buy too many different plants. Better, says Helen, to buy three of the same plant you love and place them in your garden where the light conditions are different. See where that plant thrives best, and transplant them all to that area.

Another no-no: "Don't buy plants that all bloom at once. A month later, nothing! Design your garden to have a long blooming period. You want a long season of interest, from early spring to late October."

About gardening to complement your home's architecture: "There are a lot of older homes in Maplewood and South Orange. That goes for plants, too. In the early 1900s, for example, yews were popular. And mountain laurel."

Other "old-fashioned" plants to consider: lilacs ("Thrive on really cold winters"); forsythia ("Coppicing, pruning to ground-level, will rejuvenate old plants"), and coleus, annuals much-beloved since Victorian times for their colorful foliage. "And easy to grow from cuttings. Just stick them in a rooting medium."

Also key to successful gardening in our area: Deer resistant plants, such as mountain laurel, and plants that do well in the shade -- there's a lot of shade in our towns, thanks to the abundance of old, large trees.

So here we are in cold, gray January, poring over seed catalogs and dreaming of spring in Technicolor. How to go about planning next season's garden?

"Living in New Jersey, most of us look out on our gardens from a window, especially the kitchen window," Helen says. "Maybe you want a flowering tree? Should it have a vertical canopy? Or do you have space for a horizontal canopy? A multiple or single trunk tree? Something shrubby that offers screening, or a tree that creates shade?"

Decisions, decisions! Helen's advice is especially comforting: "You really can't make a mistake. There will be plants that die. Ask why. Was there too much sun?

Too little sun? Did you prepare the planting hole properly? Were those plants not happy living together?

"Relax, and take it as a learning experience."

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