

How to Avoid the Top 10 Gardening Mistakes

New gardeners are often discouraged by the myriad unexpected challenges - or failures - that occur in a vegetable garden. Below are notes taken during Katie Pace's presentation at The Natural Gardener on June 13, 2015.

Not enough sun

According to Katie, the general rule is that leafy plants require 6-8 hours of sun and fruiting plants require 8-10 hours of sun.

When determining your garden location, take into consideration shadows cast by trees and buildings. Since shadows change both throughout the day and seasonally (winter shadows are longer), Katie suggests taking the time to observe your space carefully and plan accordingly.

Poor soil conditions

Katie recommends a minimum of 12 inches of soil for most vegetables and 18 inches for tomatoes. Your soil should be 1/3 organic material and be dark in color and smell earthy. It should also have just the right amounts of sand and clay. Too much clay will form hard clumps; too much sand will not hold its shape. In her garden, Katie topdresses monthly with compost to improve her soil conditions.

Water source not close enough

Make certain to place your garden near a water source. If you have to bring water to the garden using only a watering can, you will be unlikely to keep up with it. This is particularly important when planting from seeds as they may need to be watered 1-2 times per day. Fortunately, this should not be a problem at Adelphi Acre Community Garden.

Starting too big

Starting small allows you to get a feel for gardening in your area without becoming overwhelmed. Once you have had success with a small garden, you can easily expand it.

Garden is too far away

Another mistake gardeners make is not locating their garden where they'll see it daily. The old adage "out of sight, out of mind" applies here. Personally, I've found the easiest way for me to give my plot adequate attention was to change my route home from work to drive right past the community garden. I can quickly survey the plot from the road, and stop if necessary.

Ignoring planting seasons

Another key mistake gardeners make is ignoring the planting seasons. Austin has different planting seasons from other parts of the country. We can typically plant earlier and garden through the fall. In addition, we have very hot summers and extreme temperature changes can lead to quick freezes. Know the average frost dates and refer to the [Travis County Planting Schedule](#) to find out what to plant and when. The Sustainable Food Center offers classes on extending your growing season.

Not doing research

There is a lot of information on the web, from fellow gardeners, and even on your seed packets. Learning the tricks and tips discovered by others can only help. Tips Katie shared

included pre-soaking bean seeds to improve germination and snipping off basil flowers to extend the season.

Watering improperly

There are several ways to improperly water your garden. Katie noted that gardens that are over-watered look much like those that are under-watered. The best way to test your soil is to use the full length of your finger. Due to evaporation rates in Central Texas, the upper inch typically dries out long before the lower portions.

Katie also pointed out that the soil should be watered, not the plant. Getting water on the plant itself can encourage fungal diseases and burn your leaves. In her garden, she waters at the base of each individual plant.

Having no patience

Katie noted that many gardeners give up too soon because they are impatient. If your garden is not progressing, it is likely because the soil structure is not complete. An ecosystem must be established before the garden can thrive.

Not mulching

The benefits of mulching your garden are numerous. Gardens mulched with 3 inches of material require less water and have fewer weeds. Mulch also serves as a soil amendment and can regulate soil temperatures.

Katie did not recommend wood chips for vegetable gardens, but suggested leaves and unfinished compost are suitable. I've found that pine straw works well in my garden.