

Garden Plan Step 2: What's the Problem?

By Susan Camp

On February 16, 2014, I wrote about developing a plan for our large front garden and promised to give you updates from time to time. You may remember I said that assessment is the first step in developing a garden plan. I mentioned that we were removing old plants and examining the state of the hardscape and the condition of the soil.

Step two in our gardening plan is problem identification. We discovered a number of problems, as well as mistakes, we have made over the years.

We dug up and potted hundreds of plants last fall, discarding diseased and unattractive ones. To our surprise, almost all of the plants we kept survived the disruption. I attribute this success to planting them in good compost. The plant that survived the winter and summer with the least amount of insect damage is the Solomon's seal, probably *Polygonatum multiflorum* x 'Variegatum'. According to several of my gardening books, Solomon's seal frequently falls victim to the sawfly caterpillar, but we have not seen evidence of infestation.

Our garden soil turned out to be in better shape than we had originally thought. The main ingredient we need is organic material, good old compost.

My husband dug out large roots of the Serviceberry tree (*Amelanchier arborea*) that had spread over half the garden, a task accomplished with a pick and plenty of muscle. Now that the tree has been removed, we have a sunnier garden, with shady areas along both sides of the fence, perfect for hostas and astilbe.

I spent days removing an oyster shell pathway that ran around both sides of the garden, another backbreaking task. The shells have been stockpiled for another project, and the pathways will be built of brick pavers, to coordinate with the central garden path.

We have recognized some significant problems, from which we hope we have learned to do things differently. First, both of us have always been seduced by new plants. Instead of nurturing those we already had, each spring and fall we bought several hundred dollars worth of new plants, often sticking them in haphazardly, without regard for space, size, or soil, water, and sun requirements. This time, we want to limit the number of species to those we feel will perform best in our environment. We will utilize what we already have and develop beds containing proven performers. As we need to replace plants, we will attempt to obtain native plants to encourage pollinators.

The second problem is our continuing lamentation of our "terrible" soil without doing anything about it. Compost is making a huge difference, and it is a much safer alternative to chemicals that pollute our waterways.

The Serviceberry tree was a third problem, one my husband and I refused to confront for several years. We no longer have messy blossoms, berries, and leaves littering the walkway to the house at various seasons of the year. We will replace the Serviceberry with two small trees, one in each corner of the garden. The new trees will be kept to a manageable height by appropriate selection and careful pruning.

Finally, we decided on brick pavers to provide permanent pathways that would not need addition or replacement every few years, as the oyster shells did, cutting back a lot of hours of manual labor.

These are a few of the problems we have identified over the past year. Now we have begun the process of identifying our desired short and long-term outcomes. Every week we see a little progress and recognize that our hard work has rewards. I will keep you posted as we move through each step of this long process.

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