

Resolutions for a Healthy Garden

In 2021 when so much is still unknown, the garden can offer us a refuge from the global COVID-19 pandemic and the stresses it has brought into our lives. Our gardens can foster wildlife, feed our families, provide us with enjoyable exercise and improve our mood. Return the favor and consider adopting healthier garden practices in 2021.

- **Plant more natives:** Native plants offer so many benefits in the landscape. Most native plants are highly adaptable to Kansas weather which can include drought, flooding and extremes in both heat and cold temperatures. In addition to their hardiness, native plants play an integral part in our ecosystems. Insects, soil microbes, birds, reptiles and mammals all rely on native plants to survive. This year make a goal to incorporate more natives into your landscape. Our colleagues at the Douglas County Extension office have compiled excellent resources on planting natives for this part of the state on the website, Planting Natives in Northeast Kansas: <https://plantnativeks.weebly.com/>
- **Reduce chemical use:** All chemicals, even organic, have the potential to kill non-target species, including bees, butterflies and birds. This year, work to only use chemicals as a last resort and as part of an integrated pest management system that begins with selecting appropriate plants. Next week, I'll dive deeper into what an integrated pest management plan looks like in your garden. Always make sure to properly identify issues before using any sprays. Often calls we get to our office are after a homeowner has mis-identified and used the wrong treatment for an issue. The best case scenario is that you have wasted your time and money, the worst case is that as a result of treating for the wrong problem you have harmed insects, animals and in some cases, the very plant you're working to care for.
- **Test your soil:** Soil tests should be done every 3-5 years for your lawn, flower garden or vegetable garden. If you are applying fertilizer without a soil test, you're likely to be over applying. As with chemicals this over-application is a waste of time and money but can also have a negative effect on your soil and our environment. You can learn more about soil testing in Shawnee County on our website: <https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/soil-testing.html>
- **Grow food:** There are endless benefits to growing your own food. Often, we'll eat more fresh produce if we grow it ourselves and there's a certain amount of satisfaction you get from growing and tending plants that then provide you with a reward. Most of us cannot grow all the food we need, but if you don't grow any of your own food, make it a goal to start small. Herbs can be a great place to start since they are both easy to grow and can be grown in pots, taking up very little space. Using herbs to cook with reduces the need for salt and other seasonings so you can experience the health benefits right away. If you already have an expansive vegetable garden, consider donating excess produce to neighbors or local food banks. More information on growing your own food can be found on our website: <https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/vegetables.html>

- **Compost:** The EPA estimates that more than 10,000 pounds of yard waste was sent to landfills in 2018. This valuable refuse could instead be used to enrich your soil with nutrients and improve the structure of the heavy clay soils many of us have. Thanks to a partnership with the Shawnee County Refuse Department, our office gives free compost bin vouchers to Shawnee County residents. For additional information on the compost bin program, visit the soil testing website listed above. For additional information on how to compost, visit our soil and compost page: <https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/compost.html>
- **Mulch and water trees and shrubs:** New and established trees and shrubs need water throughout the year. From hot summer days to cold, dry winters, don't forget to give trees and shrubs a slow, deep watering. When winter temperatures rise above 50 degrees, water those plants deeply and in hot summer months, a deep weekly watering will keep your plants thriving. To help keep the soil around your plants moist, mulch 1-2" deep in a doughnut shape. Never make a mulch "volcano" around trees or shrubs as this can damage bark. Tree and shrub care information can also be found on our website: <https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/trees-and-shrubs.html>