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 A Thinking Man's Garden

 Willie O. Chance III

 Houston County Extension Agent

Past droughts and freezes have taken their toll on our ornamentals--an azalea here, a camellia there, and your landscape is beginning to look skimpy. If you are thinking about replacing some of these plants, a little advance planning can save you much grief later.

When thinking about adding to your home landscape, you should keep several factors in mind. When selecting plants, things to consider include plant size and shape, bloom and leaf color and care needed.

We can estimate plant size and shape at maturity. Look at the hole in your landscape that needs to be filled. Pick a plant to fit that hole. Usually, we're inclined to plant plants which are too large for the site. Resist this temptation if at all possible. Select a plant that fits the site in size and shape. Call our office and ask for a copy of 'Landscape Plant Materials". It lists recommended plants and their ultimate sizes.

We all enjoy blooming plants, but sometimes bloom color clashes with other colors. Orange azaleas look good in front of a light-colored house, but look hot in front of a brick house. Consider bloom color when selecting plants. Mass colors together instead of mixing them. Match colors outside the house in flower beds like you match colors inside.

Plants differ greatly in the amount of sun they need. Azaleas and dogwoods prefer shade so do not plant them in full sun. Junipers, roses, pyracanthas and most blooming plants prefer full sun. So when you pick a plant for a site, consider its shade tolerance. Also, if a plant is shade tolerant, it may not do well in full shade all day. Most plants need 6 to 8 hours of sun each day. Shade tolerant plants only need 2 to 4 hours of sun a day.

Consider possible pest problems. Insects can ruin some ornamentals and some plants seem to be insect magnets. Ligustrum always seems to have scale problems. Lacebugs love to chew on azaleas and boxwood often has mites. Although roses are beautiful, they tend to have a great many problems and must be sprayed. Redtips and euonymus are often attacked by disease. Avoid problem plants.

Next, ask yourself how wet the site tends to be. No plants will grow in standing water, but some plants are better at living in wet areas. Yaupon holly, cast iron plant (aspidistra), English ivy, ajuga, and liriope are usually good selections for wet sites.

Another concern in establishing a new plant is fertilizer. Don't fertilize newly planted shrubs until spring. When you dig the hole for the shrub, bring in a pint of soil for a soil test. This way we can better tell you how to fertilize.

Finally, remember, it's better to plant a one dollar plant in a five dollar hole than to plant a five dollar plant in a one dollar hole. In other words, make the hole large enough for your chosen shrub. Plant it at the same level as the plant was originally grown, water to settle the dirt around the roots, and mulch the plants to keep the ground around it moist, especially until the plant is established.

For more information on a smart landscape, contact the Houston county Extension Service at 542-2020 in Warner Robins or 987-2028 in Perry.