



LEFT: Proper soil amendment is essential to great gardens.  
Great gardens can happen when proper pruning, soil management and perfect plant location are properly addressed.

## Spring Garden Essentials

BY DEREK THOMAS

gardenspot



Plants like these hostas will not produce great results if planted in full sun.

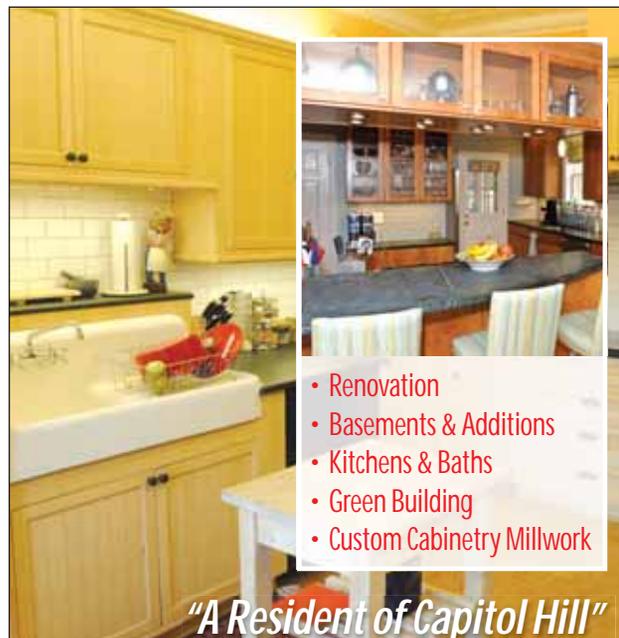
As winter begins to loosen its grip on our Capitol Hill gardens, there is an awakening that happens in the hearts and minds of all garden aficionados. Garden centers are filled to capacity with people who have been bitten by the spring gardening bug. Folks will fill carts and cars with supplies and plants in a frantic spring-time ritual that is as anticipated as winter's end. Each year few garden shopping trips will rival that first expedition you take on a chilly spring day with visions of hosta and hollyhock swirling round in your head. Taking the time to think about three important garden essentials will save you loads of sweat equity and cold hard cash.

### Soils

Soil is alive. It is composed of inorganic matter, organic matter, air, water and millions of microorganisms. Inorganic matter in our soils is generally composed of sand, silt and clay. Organic matter found in soils comes from decaying plants, animals, animal excretion and other living organisms. Organic matter is vital for plant growth and supports microorganism activity. In addition to supplying essential plant nutrients, organic matter improves aeration, water retention and nutrient holding capacity of soils.

When working your soil, remember everything you do impacts the health. Organic nutrients must be added on a regular basis to maintain soil health. When possible, try to use only organic additives and fertilizers. Synthetic fertilizers usually cause more harm than good.

Never work the soil when it is wet. This will remove the air and alter the very structure of the soil. A simple test to check if your soil is too wet to work is to take a ball of soil in your hand and squeeze; if water seeps out, wait a day or two to work your soil.



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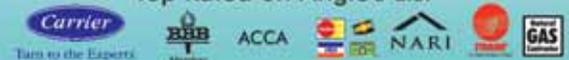
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This great urban space will not need to apply for a plant stimulus package. The owner, an amateur gardener, took the time to follow some simple rules of spring garden essentials.

Animals can cause great harm to soils and plants. Please remember your dog or cat has very strong nitrates in their urine and excretions and will damage plants. Also keep in mind we live together in this city, so when walking your dog, be mindful of other people's plantings.

Remember most of your success or failure in gardening can be linked to proper soil management.

### Pruning

Any successful garden relies heavily upon the gardener having a working knowledge of pruning. Keep in mind you should never prune a plant without understanding how it grows and what your desired result is for that plant. You cannot force prune a plant in to being something it is not. Take the time to learn your plants needs, and you will need to make fewer trips to the garden center to replace victims of your indiscriminate butchering.

### Ornamental Pruning

Whenever portions of a plant are removed, the plant will usually respond by making new growth elsewhere. Therefore gardeners can prune to shape and control the desired look of a plant. This is used especially in topiary and espalier training and annual renewal pruning or pollarding. Take the time to learn if your plant is suited to this type of pruning. If you purchase a plant

that is already clipped into some interesting shape, find out the requirements of keeping it clipped, and you and your plant will be happier for it.

### Pruning for health

Pruning is also beneficial when done to remove dead or damaged portions of a plant. This type of pruning helps the plant by reducing the energy that is wasted when the plant tries to keep a weak or damaged portion of it alive. Broad leaf evergreens are sometimes wind burnt in the winter and benefit from pruning back to live wood. Trees that have broken or snapped limbs should be pruned back to the nearest node or branch collar. Some plants like to be pruned heavily in early spring to encourage a fresh flush of growth that makes for better health in the months to come. However, plants like azaleas and trees like dogwoods will not bloom if you prune them now since the limbs you prune will be their blossom bearing limbs.

### Caution in Pruning

Before pruning, understand the plant. For example a mature holly will usually take a severe pruning to the ground and re-grow; however, a similarly mature oak will probably not re-grow, or re-growth will be weak and not desirable.

If in doubt, check with an expert before pruning. A little research prior to pruning

goes a long way to insuring happy plants and happy gardeners.

### Location, Location, Location

I have to say location three times in this heading so that hopefully we will all understand this fact – a plant's location is directly connected to a plant's success. Plants are able to grow in every region of the earth where there is light and air. Some specialized plants are even able to grow in soilless conditions, and others are able to go for months without water.

What most plants don't do well is acclimate to conditions that are outside of their desired range. For example, your hosta if planted in full sun will fry and bake in the summer leaving you with a very undesirable garden of burnt leaves. Many of the summer's favorite annuals are not designed for dense shade gardens, so planting your petunias in the shade will probably leave you with less than desired results in July. Take the time to ask at the garden center what the plants you are going to purchase will need – sunny, shaded or something in between. This often-overlooked fact makes a big difference in long-term success in your garden.

### A Final Thought

Picking the perfect plant for your perfect place will get you well along the road of garden deliciousness. If you take the time to get soil, proper pruning and, most importantly, proper location addressed up front, you won't be running to the garden center this fall looking for a plant stimulus plan. In fact, your garden will be doing what so many other important areas seem to be faltering in recently, the provision of peaceful tranquility. Enjoy.

*Derek Thomas, a certified professional horticulturist, is principal of Thomas Landscapes. His garden designs have been featured on HGTV's Curb Appeal. He can be reached at [www.thomaslandscapes.com](http://www.thomaslandscapes.com) or 301-642-5182. ★*

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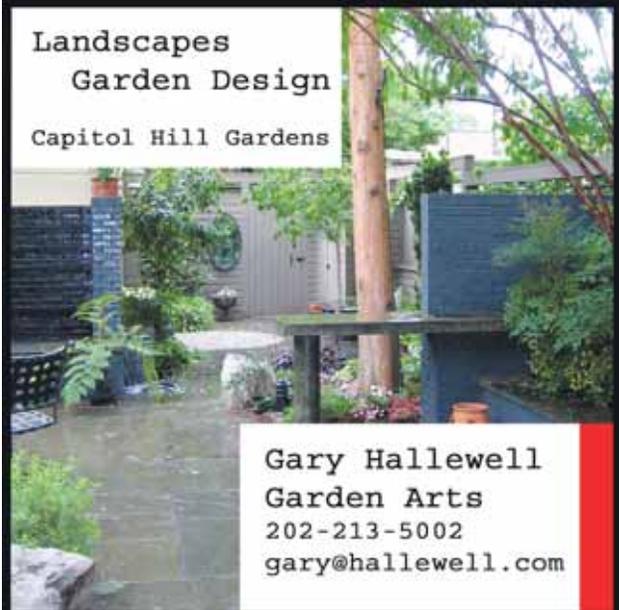
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