

GARDENING AT ALTITUDE WITH AN ATTITUDE

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At the conclusion of a very satisfying forty-year career in public horticulture I retired, with my wife Patricia, to Estes Park. My last 26 working years were spent in Denver, with the zoo and botanic gardens. In transitioning from the Mid-West to Denver, there was a definite learning curve to gardening successfully here. The same can be said for moving, in retirement, from 5,280 ft. elevation to my present 8,000 ft. elevation garden.

As a professional horticulturist my primary interest has always been plants. Unlike Joan Sapp whose work I respect and admire, I do not consider myself to be a landscape designer. No, my small garden is a hodgepodge of plants, native and adapted non-natives, that interest me for a variety of reasons. It will always be a “work in progress,” and that is why I enjoy spending time in it.

Over the past eleven years I have lived and gardened in Estes Park there are things I have observed, discovered, and learned that some of you may find of interest. Perhaps I can even save those gardeners recently transplanted here, from kinder and gentler growing conditions than ours, some headaches and setbacks as you learn to garden at altitude.

Our shorter growing season means plants take longer to establish. For each 1,000 ft. one goes up in elevation you shorten the growing season by a week. We may experience both late frosts in spring and early frosts in the fall. Our night temperatures are cooler year-round. That allows us to grow and harvest peas all summer without the vines withering and dying but is tough on tomatoes, certain annuals and perennials. It means finding and taking advantage of micro-climates in your landscape that may make the difference between growing a favorite plant successfully or not.

Mentioning the term “loamy-soil” at a cocktail party in Estes Park will most certainly brand you as a newcomer. The majority of us garden in gravelly, decomposed granite and that is only after we have dug-up and removed the rocks and boulders lurking just beneath the surface. Our so-called “soil” is nearly devoid of organic matter and water drains through it as if poured through a sieve. There is little elemental nitrogen available for plant growth so proper and frequent fertilizing is critical to having a successful garden.

In case you haven't noticed, it is frequently windy in the Estes Valley, especially in winter. Few broadleaf evergreens grow well in local gardens. Wind equals rapid desiccation of plant foliage and flowers. Combined with increased light intensity at higher altitude, the challenge of keeping your garden adequately watered is daunting. Using boulders, walls, and even larger plants to create wind breaks for more tender ones can be the difference between success and failure. Water plants deeply and infrequently. Carefully observe your plants and learn how long they can go between each watering before exhibiting signs of wilting. New shrub and

evergreen plantings will benefit from a wire “cage” around them, covered with burlap to reduce the effects of sun and wind during their first winter in your garden.

What about all those critters? I have developed a keen interest since moving here in finding so-called deer- elk- rabbit- ground squirrel-resistant plants for my garden. This, too, is a work in progress. Deer and rabbits seem to be “trainable” to avoid plants with aromatic foliage or that are routinely sprayed with repellent sprays (Liquid Fence and similar products). Rabbits may be live-trapped and relocated. Moles and voles may be repelled with liquid soil drenches of specifically formulated mole/vole repellents applied by hose-end spray bottles. When using repellent sprays on plants, the trick is to apply them at the time of planting so a critter’s first taste of the plant is offensive. Re-application may be necessary every week for a few weeks, then every month through-out the growing season. If you don’t want to go to war with the critters your only recourse is to fence your yard or garden to exclude deer and elk, only engaging in chemical warfare using repellent sprays or careful plant selection to discourage the smaller ones. After eleven years of encircling individual plants with a variety of fence materials I have finally installed a deer/elk proof fence. I now only fence individual plants with vinyl-coated chicken wire until they become established and then remove the wire protection. I’m very much looking forward to having a far less cluttered garden with an adjacent native plant mountain meadow in miniature in my front yard.

In conclusion, I want to recommend and encourage you, if not already a member, to join the Estes Park Garden Club. Meetings are held the second Monday of the month, at 10:30 AM, in the Hondius Room of the Estes Valley Library. You will find yourself in the company of mountain gardeners eager to share their successes, failures, and enthusiasm for making the Estes Valley bloom. I look forward to seeing you there.

