It's My Park | Installing Plants

Last Updated: November 9, 2023

All planting projects must be approved by NYC Parks staff.

PfP encourages groups to plant native species whenever possible to provide additional habitat and food sources for pollinators and birds and enhance ecosystem resiliency across our city. Please reach out to your community engagement coordinator (CEC) or itsmypark@cityparksfoundation.org for nursery information and other resources about native plants.

How to Determine Where to Plant

Meet with your community engagement coordinator and parks and recreation manager (PRM) and/or the park's gardener to discuss locations where your plants would thrive.

- Healthy soil - Ideally the soil will be nutrient-rich, moisture-retentive, and well draining (Stack, 2016).
    - Observe the soil. What does it look like? While soil composition and texture varies by location, high quality soil tends to be darker.
    - Use a hand cultivator, trowel, or a similar tool to sift the soil. The soil should be fairly easy to move. If it is very dry, hard, and difficult to move, it is likely too compact to be an ideal location (Stack, 2016). Also, look for soil organisms, such as earthworms. While certain soil organisms can be problematic for specific plants, their presence is often a sign that the soil is healthy (Stack, 2016).
    - Observe the area after a rainfall. The soil should ideally be able to retain water and avoid flooding. If the area floods, it may be an indication that the soil is not ideal.
    - Survey for other plants. Observe if other plants are thriving in the soil you intend on planting in. If the area is bare, it may be an indication that the soil is not ideal.

- Topography - Consider if the area is on a flat surface, a slope, the bottom of a hill, or anything else. This may impact where the rain water settles and how the plants may grow over time.
- Competition for resources - Consider any potential competition for resources. Are there invasive plants and/or weeds nearby that are spreading and may take over an area shortly? Are there any large trees or shrubs that may block sunlight near the ground? Consider any challenges a specific planting site may face.
- Nearby water source - While not required, it is beneficial to select a planting location with a nearby water source. This makes watering and maintaining a site easier and could greatly impact the longevity of plants at a specific location.
- Disturbance level - As we are working in public spaces, it is important to consider if the area will likely be frequently disturbed or not. Is the planting location in an enclosed area with a fence, or is it open and may experience high foot traffic, dog walks, etc? Finding locations away from foot traffic, litter, dogs, and other disturbances is recommended.
- Safety - It is recommended to avoid any locations that are frequently littered, especially with potentially dangerous items such as needles, broken glass, or feces.

How to Select Plants

Planning and foresight will help ensure a long-lasting and beneficial garden. Some questions to consider when selecting plants:

- What is the intended purpose of the plant? Is it to provide shade, color, beauty, or something else? Is it to attract pollinators to the garden, such as bees or butterflies? Is it to deter pests? Can native species be used? Identifying the initial purpose and goals for the space will help in identifying the appropriate plants to achieve the desired effect.
- What plants are likely to thrive in your designated planting location? Consider the soil quality; if the area often floods or is dry; if the area receives full sun, full shade, or partial sun and shade; and if the area is on a slope. Also consider what other plants are nearby and how they could impact the garden. The USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map can help in identifying appropriate plants for different areas (USDA, 2021).

- How often and how fast does the plant grow? Will the designated space be enough room for this plant over time? Are there any future potential restrictions with a given site such as fencing, retaining wall, etc?
- What are the maintenance requirements for the plant? Will the plant be properly maintained given available resources? Consider if the plant will need frequent watering, pruning, or protection from weeds and/or pests.
- How much volunteer and/or park staff assistance is available to help with planting and ongoing maintenance needs?
- What other factors are there to consider regarding this plant's survival and growth in the designated location? Consider how resilient the plant should be in any relevant circumstances. Should the plant be pollution-tolerant or drought-tolerant? Are pests commonly an issue with this plant?
- How long will the plant likely last? Is it an annual that will need to be replanted each year or is it long-lasting such as perennials, trees, or shrubs?
- How will the plant appear in each season? Consider if and how the plant will change each season and if that is important to you.
- Is the plant native to the region? Utilizing plants that occurred naturally in the region has many advantages as they have evolved and adapted to the specific region where they will be planted. These advantages often include fewer maintenance requirements and higher tolerance for local weather and pests, and they also provide habitat and food for wildlife (Audubon, 2021; U.S. Forest Service, 2021). When possible, we encourage the use of native plants to promote biodiversity and sustainability.
- What is your budget for plants?
- What supplies are available for planting? Consider what tools you will require. If you are planting fairly large plants, do you have the shovels necessary for the task? If you are planting fairly small plants, do you have trowels or smaller shovels necessary for the task?

How to Prepare the Site

- Survey the area - Before beginning, survey the entire area to make sure there are not any potentially dangerous materials in the garden bed or poison ivy. Please refer to our *Important Safety Tips* document for more information.
- Remove litter - Remove any litter carefully and safely.
- *Optional* Cultivate the soil - If the soil is particularly dry and compacted, it is recommended to cultivate the soil before planting. This step loosens and aerates the surface of the soil, making it easier for air, water, and nutrients to access the roots of the plants. Using a hand cultivator, long-handled cultivator, gardening hoe, or something similar, cultivate the soil gently but thoroughly.
- Remove weeds - Once the soil is loosened, it will be easier to remove any weeds. Make sure you are confident and completely certain about the identification of any weeds before you remove them. Please refer to the It's My Park Tip Sheet, "Common NYC Invasive Plants", for more information.
- Garden design - Before beginning planting, lay out all of the plants in their containers so you can envision the entire space before planting begins and keep track of where each plant should be installed.
- PfP Tip! - It is far easier to plant after a rainfall as the soil is softer.

What to Do After Planting

- *Optional* Mulch the planting site - If mulch is available, it is recommended to lightly mulch an area after planting. The mulch will help an area retain water, reduce soil compaction, and suppress weeds (University of Illinois Extension, 2021).
- Water the site or plan for rain - Newly installed plants are more likely to survive if they are watered shortly after they are planted (University of Illinois Extension, 2021). If possible, water the site after planting. An alternative option is to plan a planting project right before a rainfall.
- Future maintenance - Continue to monitor the site after planting. Some plants require more maintenance than others, but future care and maintenance is always beneficial in ensuring the longevity of a garden.

References:

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United States Department of Agriculture. "USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map.", *2021,* Retrieved 2, June2021, from https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/.

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