

Edison Resident on how to Prepare Your Spring Garden

North Edisonian Nisha Khanna on choosing the perfect perennials and flower beds for this season's garden.

by Nisha Khanna
Community contributor

A typical suburban landscape consists of lawn and some foundation shrubs, with perhaps some trees here and there. That is what my North Edison yard looked like when we moved in some years back. But I've slowly added lots and lots of flowers everywhere and now it's much more colorful, with something blooming for most of the season. The process of making a garden more colorful and interesting by adding plants can be a bit of a hurdle for an inexperienced gardener. In spring, many of us buy pretty looking plants from the local store, and then plant them around the edges of our large lawn; usually with disappointing results. I've been there, and it took several years of experimentation and experience to work out some basics, which I'd like to share.

Planning

An absolute first step is doing some planning before you go to the store. If that sounds like work, then the good news is that this can be done in the winter, when there isn't any other gardening to do, and we really miss that green. How better to spend cold winter days than dreaming of your new and improved garden? Here are some things to consider when planning your garden

Wish list

Think about why you want more plants in your garden - is it just for the colors? Plants have much more to offer than their looks - there are fragrant plants, plants that attract butterflies and birds, plants that are fun to touch and plants that produce food. If you have young children, you may want plants that are fun for them to see or to grow. So decide what's important to you.

Location

Pick one or two areas in your yard that you want to improve each season. Is it in the front for curb-appeal? Or do you want a better view from a kitchen window? If you use your deck frequently, that would be the spot to surround with flowers. If you try to improve the whole garden at once, you may find that what looks like lots and lots of flowers in your car is insignificant when spread out over a large area.

The location will also have an impact on the choice of plants, since plants have different requirements for sunshine, water, etc. Typically, a sunny spot with good drainage that doesn't get soggy after a rain will give you many more plant

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A carefully crafted flower bed in the backyard of Khanna's home.
Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna



The front entrance of Nisha Khanna's North Edison home.
Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna



A bed of annual flowers in the back yard of Nisha Khanna's home.
Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna



The front yard of North Edison gardener Nisha Khanna's home.

Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna

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choices. You will also need access to water, which is another reason to improve one area at a time. If all your new plants are together, you can water them at the same time.

Budget

It is a good idea to decide how much money you want to spend on improving your garden each year. Along with plants and containers, you may need potting soil or soil amendments and mulch, and maybe labor unless you plan on doing the work

yourself. As an example, creating a four by ten foot perennial flower bed at a friends' home cost approximately \$175 for plants, compost, mulch and edging, with all the labor done by the home owners. We used about 10 medium sized plants which will fill in a couple of years.

Choosing plants

Keep your wish list in mind when choosing plants; after all, you have reasons to want these plants. If you want color, choose your favorite colors and make sure to include it in your plant list. Consider using woody plants such as shrubs and trees for vertical interest. Many shrubs and trees, like Azaleas and Cherries, have striking flower displays, usually in the spring. A new flower bed could have one small flowering tree as a specimen, and maybe a shrub or two with the rest of the area filled with herbaceous plants. Herbaceous plants can be annuals that live for one season, like most Marigolds, or perennials that keep coming back year after year, like Coneflower. In our area, there are also tender perennials that can live for many years, but cannot survive the winters outdoors and are sold as annuals. These include geraniums and impatiens. There may be different species of the same plant, like Salvia, that are tender or hardy. Perennials are usually more expensive than annuals, but they don't have to be replaced every year. Annuals usually have big bright flowers that last for much of the season, so you may consider mixing annuals and perennials in your bed, especially while the perennials are young and small. When choosing how

Gardening Goals

2014

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A weeping cherry tree planted at Nisha Khanna's North Edison home. Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna

many plants to buy, be aware of the mature size of woody and perennial plants. Give them room to grow to their full size or you will spend a lot of time trimming. Try to use several of each type of plant. Usually a three or five works well, looks more structured and has a bigger impact. Most of us in North Edison have a huge problem with deer in our gardens. Try to choose plants that deer don't like too much, but be aware that hungry deer may eat almost anything.

Maintenance

Any plants you add to your garden will typically require at least some maintenance. The typical maintenance chores are watering, weeding, cleaning up at the beginning or end of the season, planting new annuals each year, etc. You can minimize the required maintenance by choosing plants that are well adapted to our climate, such as plants that are native to our area. Also, make sure you choose plants suited to their location — for example, sun-loving plants should be planted where they get several hours of direct sunlight each day. Give a little thought to your garden now, and you can start making your garden look like the pictures in the magazines. Happy gardening!

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Showcasing Nature

North Edison gardener Nisha explains how to choose the best containers to showcase your flowers.

Containers and Flower Beds

The simplest way to brighten an area is with a group of containers filled with your favorite flowers. Place containers on a deck, near an entrance, or tucked into a corner of the yard – anywhere! Plantings in containers are easy to move and change. Just remember that for big impact, you want big containers or a group of smaller containers.

If you want to make a bigger, more permanent change around your lawn area, add or expand a flower bed. You can add an island bed right in the middle of the lawn, especially a less used front lawn. Alternatively, you can add a border at an edge, like a walkway or driveway.

It is important to make the size of flower beds proportionate to your house and yard. Many beginning gardeners make their beds too small or skinny. Be bold! A mistake is easily rectified with some grass seed. In my half-acre yard in North Edison, my flower beds are at least four feet wide by eight to ten feet long.



Pictured above is the "island bed" Nisha crafted at her North Edison home. Choosing the right flower bed can make all the difference. Photo courtesy of Nisha Khanna