



Gardening Basics for Arlington & Alexandria, VA

Hardiness Zone: Arlington and Alexandria are mostly in Zone 7b

Last frost date: between April 10-21

First frost date: between November 8-28

Average rainfall: about 40 inches a year

Soil type: clay, poor quality; needs amendments

When to mulch plants: in the fall and/or spring

Why mulch: it improves the soil, retains moisture, controls weeds and reduces water consumption, saving time and money

Where to get mulch: both Arlington County and the City of Alexandria make it available, often for free. See Resources Section below for details.

Soil testing: recommended every 3 years; kits are available through the Virginia Cooperative Extension Office (VCE) on 3308 S. Stafford St., Arlington, VA (703 228-6414) or at Master Gardener Clinics

Recommended Integrated Pest Management and Cultural Practices

Contact VCE at 703 228-6414 for more information

* **Insect control:** Most insects are benign/beneficial to gardener. They are important to pollination, improve soil conditions, destroy various weeds, and prey on harmful insects in the garden. Insect traps, baits, repellents and biological controls can be very effective when used properly after an accurate assessment of harmful insects. Take advantage of natural predators, parasites, and pathogens that are already in your garden--encourage spiders, toads, and dragonflies. Learn to recognize eggs and larvae of beneficial insects, including parasites and egg cases. For more information and images on the web, see *Insects Pests of Ornamental Plants*. <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/2909/2909-1414/2909-1414.html>

* **Plant selection:** Choose plants that are suited to climate & soil, are disease-free or disease/insect resistant; select only sturdy plants with well-developed root systems, and buy from reputable growers. Avoid cuts, bruises, cracks, and insect damage, which are prime sites for infection.

* **Pesticides:** Always use with great caution. Only use on affected areas of plant and follow label instructions. Failure to do so can make food less safe to eat; harm and kill beneficial insects, worms, and birds; pose serious danger to people and animals from exposure or inhalation; leach into and contaminate groundwater; and induce resistance in pests. VCE will advise the correct pesticide.

* **Watering:** Water less often but deeper to improve root growth. VCE recommends 1 inch per week, which wets dry soil 5-6 inches deep. Water in the morning so plants can dry out, preventing many fungal diseases. Use a drip or soaker irrigation system, if possible, to keep foliage dry. For plants susceptible to fungi (e.g. tomatoes and roses), leave extra space between plants for good airflow. Orient plantings so winds help foliage dry quickly. Stay out of the garden while it is wet to prevent soil compaction as well as the spread of disease on shoes.

* **Sanitation:** Remove diseased/infected plant material immediately to prevent spread. Clean up & remove garden refuse that may act as over-wintering sites for pests and diseases, to drastically reduce the chance of re-infection.

* **Planning:** Make use of three (if not four) seasons by selecting plants to provide color all season long. Know your plants--by choosing the proper plant for proper location in garden you will have healthier

plants and spend less money replacing them. Diagram plant locations or use plant tags to help you remember.

* **Weed control:** Weeds often harbor pests and compete for nutrients and water. Handpick or dig specific weeds; use spot application of VT recommended weed control product as appropriate. Identify weeds before acting. This Virginia Tech site has key identification characteristics of common and not-so-common turfgrass weeds. <https://weedid.cals.vt.edu>. Additionally, this U. of Maryland site is excellent <https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/topics/lawn-weed-id-and-management>. If needed, bring a sample into one of our plant clinics or the Help Desk for identification.

* **Composting:** To start a compost pile, use a good base (12" high) or build on a pallet for airflow and drainage; ideal ratio of carbon to nitrogen is 30:1, however roughly 50% carbon or brown matter to 50% nitrogen or green matter is easier to remember; make top concave to collect rainwater; turn at least once a month to promote microbial activity that will increase decomposition; do not add dog/cat feces, diseased plant matter, tomato vines, weed seeds or animal foodstuffs. See *Backyard Composting*, http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_edu/HORT/HORT-49/HORT-49-pdf.pdf

* **Soil improvement:** Maintain slightly acidic soil (pH 6.5); get soil tested every 3 years; add organic matter to the soil, minimizing the use of nonorganic chemicals and fertilizers. See *Soil Sampling for the Home Gardener*; https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/452/452-129/452-129_pdf.pdf

Do's & Don'ts

LAWNS

Don't spend money on unnecessary fertilizers and lawn services before getting a soil test from Cooperative Extension.

Do fertilize with a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer and only in the fall; this prevents forced growth, hence disease, and limits chemical runoff into our natural water systems.

Don't collect your grass clippings; use a mulching blade and leave them on the lawn to decompose and provide free nitrogen fertilizer. If you do collect the grass, use it in a compost pile.

Do water only **once** a week in summer if rainfall has not been one inch; water in the morning to prevent disease, and water thoroughly to promote deep roots.

Don't mow lower than 2-1/2 to 3 inches for fescue lawns; this lets the grass shade its own roots, crowd out weeds, and reduces Japanese beetle larvae populations.

Do consider relatively low-maintenance ground covers for areas such as slopes where it is difficult to mow or shady areas where it is difficult to grow grass. Avoid planting English ivy, which escapes into the tree canopy and is susceptible to disease problems.

TREES

Do surround trees with mulch to protect them from mower and trimmer damage.

Don't mulch within 3-6 inches of the trunk to prevent bark rotting and rodent access; spread mulch under canopy as far as possible, and spread the word against "mulch volcanoes" erroneously employed by some landscape services.

Do use permeable paving set on stone dust rather than in cement for paths and patios to reduce run-off and increase the water that reaches tree roots.

Don't discard the leaves you collect in the fall; chop them up with your mower and compost them for future use as nutrient-rich mulch or soil conditioner.

Don't top your trees to reduce their height; always consult a certified arborist before having work done on shade trees.

Do remove ivy and other invasive climbers that threaten trees' health (as well as our natural areas) by reseeding in their mature, upright form.

SHRUBS AND PERENNIALS

- Do** select non-invasive varieties that will do well in this area under the specific conditions in which they will grow; e.g., sunny or shady, wet or dry: research your selections!
- Do** group together plants with similar environmental requirements and mulch them to conserve moisture and your energy.
- Do** select healthy plants that will thrive in the location you will put them in.
- Do** ask for help in making selections—the more information you have the better. Get the right plant for the right place.

Resources

Virginia Cooperative Extension, Fairlington Community Center

3308 S. Stafford St., Arlington. Phone 703-228-6414 (<http://offices.ext.vt.edu/arlington>). Knowledgeable staff can offer advice on local conditions, pest management, plant and insect identification. Specific brochures and flyers, as well as soil test kits, are available at no cost to the public. VCE runs the Master Gardener program as well as the Extension Master Gardener Help Desk.

Extension Master Gardener Help Desk

Call or walk-in clinic located at Virginia Cooperative Extension Office, Fairlington Community Center, Monday-Friday, 9 AM-noon. Phone: 703-228-6414. This is a year round **Plant Clinic**. Call with questions and/or bring in gardening samples for help identifying, diagnosing problems, etc. Photos of problem are helpful. You can also email questions to mgarlalex@gmail.com.

Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia (<https://mgnv.org/>)

Check out this excellent website for gardening tips, activities, special events, demonstration gardens, workshops, free classes, and more!

Virginia Cooperative Extension Website – <http://www.ext.vt.edu/> and select ‘**Publications and Resources**’ Direct access to all the publications and other resources of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. For a broader internet search, enter a topic in your search engine, then add ‘site:edu’ to it. It will yield results from universities, extension offices, etc. that are highly reputable sources. For example: **deer resistant plants site:edu**.

Master Gardener Program: VCE offers Master Gardening course every fall comprising over 60 hours of classroom training plus 60 hours of hands-on internship. Master Gardeners volunteers help educate the public in sustainable landscape practices. They volunteer at plant clinics, the Help Desk, and demonstration gardens, offer public education programs, and assist people in diagnosing and recommending treatments for plant-related problems. For more information, go to mgnv.org and select ‘About us’. Also, you can email or call us to mgarlalex@gmail.com or VCE at 703-228-6414.

Soil tests: The Virginia Cooperative Extension office, and its Master Gardener plant clinics, has soil kits, information and mailing instructions for sending soil samples to Virginia Tech for analysis.

Farmers Markets and Plant Clinics

Master Gardener **Plant Clinics** are available to answer gardening questions at the following sites:

Arlington Farmers Market Plant Clinic, at N. 14th and N. Courthouse Rd. On Saturday mornings, 8-11 a.m. from late-April to late September Market goes year round. <http://www.community-foodworks.org/arlington/>

Old Town Alexandria Farmers Market Plant Clinic located at Alexandria Market Square, 301 King Street, Saturdays from 7-9:30 a.m., May through September <https://www.alexandriava.gov/OldTownFarmersMarket>

Del Ray (Alexandria) Farmers Market Plant Clinic on Saturdays, May through September, 8:30-11:00 a.m. Located at the corner of East Oxford and Mt. Vernon Avenues in Alexandria.

<https://delrayfarmersmarket.com/>

Arlington Central Library Plant Clinic in the East Lobby, 1015 N. Quincy Street, on Wednesday evenings, mid-March till the end of October, from 6:45 to 8:45p.m.

Demonstration Gardens - maintained by Master Gardeners and open to the public.

Simpson Park Gardens, E. Monroe Avenue at the end of Leslie Avenue, past the YMCA, in Alexandria; contains butterfly, scented, and tufa gardens, and the waterwise garden, which demonstrates a low maintenance garden in an exposed, dry area.

Organic Vegetable Garden at Potomac Overlook Regional Park on Marcy Road in Arlington demonstrates organic gardening techniques

Rock Quarry Garden at Bon Air Park on Wilson Blvd and N. Lexington Street in Arlington is a garden with rocks, slopes, shade, part-shade and sun.

Sunny Garden, also at Bon Air Park in Arlington, displays plants that thrive in the sun

Glencarlyn Library Community Garden, off Carlin Springs Road in Arlington, consists of a series of theme gardens.

Teaching Garden, Fairlington Community Center in Arlington, has an edibles training area, container plants and ongoing education classes.

Other Helpful Information

Garden Clubs Contact the National Capital Area Federation of Garden Clubs at 202-399-5958 or go to <http://www.ncagardenclubs.org>, or contact your neighborhood civic association for information.

Community Gardens are available for those without access to a yard, these garden plots are available for a nominal rental fee. S *MGNV Community Gardens*. <https://mgmv.org/community-gardens-arl-alex/>

Public Gardens: The Washington, DC, area has many wonderful gardens, among them River Farm, Mount Vernon, Green Spring and Meadowlark in Virginia; & the National Arboretum, the Botanical Gardens, Hillwood, and Dumbarton Oaks in D.C.

Garden Centers: Many fine garden centers/nurseries can be found in the metro area, such as Greenstreet Gardens, Nature by Design, Hybla Valley Nursery, Behnke Nurseries, Merrifield Garden Center, Burke Nursery, Holly, Woods & Vines and others. Of course, both Home Depot and Lowe's offer gardening equipment, supplies, and plants.

Arborists: See <http://www.goodtreecare.com/> for names of certified arborists, or call VCE.

Free Mulch – Free mulch is available for both pickup and delivery in Alexandria and Arlington

- The City of Alexandria offers free mulch beginning in early spring and continues until it runs out. Delivery for a fee is available for residents or they can pick up their own at the Eisenhower site. See *Yard Waste Recycling*. <https://www.alexandriava.gov/YardWaste>
- Arlington County provides free mulch for pickup year round as well as mulch delivery. See *Mulch & Dirt*. <https://recycling.arlingtonva.us/residential/mulch-dirt/>

Additional Helpful Websites

- *U.S. National Arboretum* <https://usna.usda.gov/>
- *National Capital Area Federation of Garden Clubs* <http://www.ncagardenclubs.org/>
- *American Horticultural Society and Garden (“River Farm”)*, <http://ahsgardening.org/>
- *Green Spring Gardens Park* <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/green-spring>