

Black Thumb Disease

Written by Will Balk, Jr.

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So you think you've got a black thumb – that you kill any plant you try to grow. We get lots of really desperate questions from gardeners at the Master Gardener booth during the warm months at the Farmers Market in Port Royal, but those questioners aren't the real Black Thumb brigade.

Instead, the supposed failed gardeners are usually the spouses or friends who linger in the background while the concerned grower asks the question.

The person with the Killer Digit may not even hang out near the Master Gardeners, even though we proclaim our willingness to try to answer any plant question with science-backed information, as well as an encouraging pat on the back, if needed. No, this self-described Black Thumb will usually disclaim any interest in growing plants, that he or she has given up trying, that it's just too frustrating. Is that you?

Well, I can pretty confidently assure you that I – a certified Master Gardener, mind you – have certainly killed hundreds more plants than you are ever likely to kill. If you're going to garden, it's going to happen, and sometimes it will happen a lot. The trick is to learn from these murderous episodes and to keep trying until you find something that works.

I was thinking about this the other day when I came across some suggestions from Steve Asbell, a garden blogger (therainforestgardener.com) who writes about the joys and tribulations of gardening in Florida's climate extremes. While Steve's focus was on the specifics of Florida gardening, I think I have come up with some excellent suggestions for frustrated gardeners here in our Lowcountry setting. Some will apply almost anywhere, some are really meant for

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Lowcountry gardeners; some will be very useful to the inexperienced or frustrated gardener – and even the Black Thumb gardener.

Here are some pointers you might consider if you've been going crazy trying to grow something here.

Relax.

If you've killed a few plants over the years or felt defeated by that not-blooming peony you bought; if your lawn is mostly brown patches of weeds or bare soil; if your cast-iron plant turns out to be a lily-livered wimp – just relax a bit. Really, we've all been there at one time or another. Start a compost pile for the failed learning experiences, and try something new. Ask a friend for suggestions about which plant to try, and be sure to ask what kind of conditions the plant requires. Then, just plow ahead. Don't give up.

Choose plants that will grow here in the Lowcountry.

It's easy to forget that not everything grows like kudzu in our often wonderful climate. Many plants, however, cannot survive our strange winters. We often have wet soil during much of the winter, the temperatures in January can be way below freezing or into the seventies and even higher.

Many plants, both ornamentals and fruits and vegetables, require a long period of relatively unbroken cold dormancy, and the Lowcountry just cannot promise that. Many fruit trees – varieties of peach, apple, pear, grape – have a "cold requirement" for successful fruiting. Some of these fruits have been developed with shorter cold requirements, so be sure to choose varieties which are suitable for our climate.

There is often a great temptation to try to grow tropical fruits here. Most often, citrus fruits, avocados, and bananas are attempted. Fortunately, if they are coddled, protected, and carefully tended, some varieties can successfully fruit here. Often, however, the long maturing season required extends well into frosty or freezing weather, and the crop is lost. Choose your

varieties carefully, with advice from a local grower with experience, and be sure to follow the care recommendations.

Similarly, some of our favorite ornamentals are devastated by our summer heat or frustrated by our winters' shortened cold season. Lilacs are just going to frustrate you in the Lowcountry. Tulips are suitable only if treated as annuals or as pot plants. But camellias grow beautifully here, and many old-fashioned narcissus, crinums, and Dutch iris can ease your bulb envy by blooming superbly here.

Plant seasonal flowers and vegetables at the right time for our climate.

Trying to grow a crop of lettuce in our July heat will just make you yell. In fact, the height of summer is a terrible time for growing lots of veggies and flowers. Planting lettuce, carrots, cabbage, kale to grow in the cool season – even into winter – is much more successful than wishing they could cope with the summer heat. Save the summer vegetable gardening for okra, eggplant, hot peppers, and a few other crops. Even tomatoes, which we often think of as a hot summer crop, usually quit pollinating once the temperature stays above 75 at night or 90 during the day. There are some heat-tolerant varieties being marketed, so you could try those; or you could plan on tomatoes in the early summer season and again in the fall.

It's pointless to try to get nasturtiums to bloom through the summer, and you might as well give up on planning on a floral display in July and August from such beauties as snapdragons and pansies. They are magnificent, however, if treated as winter-bloomers.

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