I am sure you have rested from your fall clean-up of the garden and have forgotten the heat, garden pests, and plant failures of last summer. You are probably actually looking forward to receiving garden catalogues and dreaming of your most rewarding summer ever. Before you order plants and spend lots of money, first spend a little time thinking, planning and organizing your garden. There are common mistakes that people often make when preparing for a new gardening year. Let's take a look at these mistakes and eliminate from your gardening experience.

The most common mistake made is planting a garden in an area that doesn't receive sufficient sunlight. I know what you are thinking; we live in an area that receives plenty of sunshine. Because of that fact, we sometimes assume that an area is flooded with sunlight all day. Check out the area you have in mind at various times during the day. Is shade provided by a wall, a tree, a neighbor's house? What time of the day is the area in sunlight or shade?

Most vegetable plants need at least eight hours a day of sunlight. Our sunshine can get very intense. Remember walls reflect light and heat when choosing a gardening spot.

Another mistake is planting your crops too close together. When seeds are sown, or transplants are planted, everything is small, and there is much open space. It is common to plant closer
than the recommended spacing to get more output per limited space. Perhaps you are thinking a profusion of flowers or a basket of tomatoes will be the result. By planting too much too close, you may decrease your output. Plants packed too closely together cannot get proper air circulation and are more susceptible to disease. Additionally, larger plants will grow taller than smaller plants and shade them out.

The following error is one I believe many of us have done. Have you ever bought cheap transplants? You think you are saving a few pennies by trying to nurture not-so-prime plants. By doing so, it may delay or hinder your gardening attempts. Sick plants will struggle all season. It is best to buy plants are healthy and invest the money in hardy stock.

Watering properly is one of the most important secrets to gardening success. Here on the high desert, people have a tendency to over water. If you let plants get too wet, it is a recipe for disease. Many people who have relocated here water more than they did in their former home. After all, we’re on the desert, right? Knowing the soil and the plant's water requirement are critical issues in plant management. Sometimes under watering will occur. If plants get too dry, they will wilt. Then you will have plants that are handicapped and weak.

The key to healthy plants is consistent watering. In the beginning of the growing season, light watering is sufficient. As the season progresses, deep watering is required to encourage deep root growth. Plant with deep roots will survive a dry spell much easier than plants with a shallow root system.

Another common mistake is planting varieties of vegetables, fruits, or flowers that are not a good match for our climate. Not all plants grow vigorously in all climates. The best way to select plants that will thrive here is reading books, such as Sunset Western Garden Book. Talk to nursery personnel. Call the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension office and a Master Gardener will be glad to help you choose what works here and what doesn't.
Over fertilizing is one more error commonly made. Many desert plants thrive on desert soil. Fertilizing these plants may damage them. They are accustomed to soil with low organic matter. But if you are planting vegetables, fertilizer is a good thing, in moderation. Over fertilizing will lead to foliage growth at the expense of produce growth. A well composted garden at the beginning of the growing season will reduce your need for fertilizers later on.

One last thing to remember is don’t plant more than you can care for. If you don’t have the time to pick the vegetables, water the garden, and fertilize the garden, don’t get carried away. Stay small and have a garden that is a joy, not a chore. Vegetables that are not picked when they are ripe will rot and be a magnet for insects and disease.

Keep all this in mind while dreaming of next summer’s garden!

For more information contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman or telephone 928-753-3788.

Master Gardeners will be holding a FRUIT TREE WORKSHOP on SATURDAY, JANUARY 12, 2008 at the home of Master Gardener Sherry Kelley, 6087 W. Chino Drive, (N. Of Hwy 68 off of W. Colorado Rd) Golden Valley. You may call 565-4936 for more information.

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