

Over the garden fence, planting a new idea

By Mary Ann Lindley, Editorial Page Editor

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“Knowledge of too many plants can actually be a hindrance; the skill comes in the editing,” wrote an English garden designer in a book that my pal Mark Hohmeister nipped from one of the office bookshelves and thought might teach me a thing or two.

We talk gardening once in a while between fuming over this or that political astonishment. I’m unhindered by a deep knowledge of plants; my personal database is so-so — I go to a garden center, see what’s beautiful, buy it and plant it.

I do like gardening for its tranquility and the sweat therapy. But until a huge water oak crashed a few years ago, my lot in old Lafayette Park tolerated only shade-loving plants — reliable impatiens, ivy-leaf ferns, certain begonias — so my repertoire was unadventurous.

Now there’s sun galore, plus a new picket fence meant to corral the new puppy, Gentry. The fence hasn’t been fool-proof for that purpose, but softening it with plants is my new project — and, inadvertently an exercise in consciousness- raising.

In “Big Plans, Small Gardens,” Andy Sturgeon, that garden writer from the UK, says first make a short list of possible plants.

“The best planting schemes are relatively simple, so it is essential not to try to cram too much in. It’s a bit like packing for a holiday; the temptation is to take a lot of stuff that you don’t need,” he wrote. “Be ruthless, because too many different plants will make an incoherent jumble ...”

Eleanor Dietrich, whose rambling backyard off of Tharpe Street is a virtual museum of native plants, stepped in to help me find coherence, and also inspiration, since about all I had on my list was zinnias.

In her well-researched way, Eleanor created a list of 10 sun-loving wildflowers that are native to this region — and a couple quite rare, such as the royal catchfly, and the Flyr’s nemesis, which is even on a Florida endangered-species list.

Native plants are advantageous to our ecosystem, Eleanor explained. They’ve adapted to our geography and climate and help provide habitat for native songbirds and butterflies.

Though many non-native plants are beautiful and grow very well here, native plants don’t typically require fertilizers, and they take less water and fewer pesticides.

They also show a gardener’s commitment to stewardship of our natural environment.

A couple of weeks ago, she brought over 10 native plants to get me started, and based on her

knowledge and real love of native plants, she added some magic: These plants will be in bloom at different seasons, so they'll be coming and going rhythmically along my fence spring, summer and fall.

We planted clusters of colors — pinks and lavenders (beardstongue and Stokes' aster), yellows there (blackeyed Susan and greyheaded coneflower), some red popped in now and then (coral sage, which butterflies love). And in their beds that curve along the fence, plants of varying heights will create a layering effect where smaller delicate plants soften the taller ones in back.

They're all perennials, so as they grow and change, I'll be learning what thrives and what struggles in that particular place.

In keeping with a natural native garden, Eleanor favors pine mulch, but as we were working, she looked on down the street and noticed a big pile of bags packed with what might have been equally natural — and free — mulch. We wandered down to inspect and, yes, those were bags of nice clean oak leaves that, recycled into a thick layer of mulch, look great and should get any green gardeners' seal of approval. (Thanks very much to my industrious Georgia Street neighbors.)

Eleanor is passionate about native plants but not demanding, and she sees the idea catching on, garden by garden, just as other big changes in society do.

“Remember when women used to talk about consciousness raising,” Eleanor said easily. That term came into being in the 1960s and '70s, when women started breaking out of traditional female roles. A bit like flowers along my fence row, women found that they could bloom in different ways at different times of their lives: getting an education, rearing children, working part time, working full time, marrying early, marrying late, marrying not at all, being married to a career, eventually retiring as industriously as a hardy perennial.

Who knew a simple row of flowers could not only be beautiful and promising, but also send such an easy message about opening up to new ideas.