

A TIME TO SOW

For every thing there is a season ...Psalms

About a billion people in the seasonal tropics of the Northern Hemisphere are sweating it out. Waiting. The 'dog days of summer' drive home the point with ferocity—nature hold the upper hand in the climate game. All the same, avid gardeners and landscapers in Guanacaste are awaiting the change in season as eagerly as the sweltering masses in New Delhi praying for the cooling monsoon rains or New Englanders watching for the first signs of spring. As the dry season wears on, the dust gets stale and old timers start watching the skies. It's "on your marks, get set, PLANT."

The truly linear have made plans and some have already placed orders with nurseries. I have received inquiries about everything from erosion control plants and products to lady-finger bananas from India.

For those who are just getting their feet wet in gardening or landscaping in our region there are a few basic principles which help ensure that your first plantings are successful. Early setbacks can be discouraging to anyone. A flowering success at the beginning breeds enthusiasm to keep going and get it better next time. Here are some tips which you might find helpful.

GET READY

It helps to try visualise what you would like to see and how you would like to feel within your planted environment. This is the first step toward an actual garden/landscape plan, which you may never actually draw, but at least it will be on file, mentally. Attempt to conceptualize in three dimensions as well, allowing for a more rapid growth rate than you would in a colder climate. That chest-high mango in a bag could well be shading your house or blocking a view in four years. If all you want is lawn from fencepost to fencepost, well, you can stop reading right here or thumb down to water saving ideas.

Does the site features distant views? If so, how do you want them framed? What clumped plantings will help achieve a more cozy feel—say,

near the terrace? If you have wind problems you might consider a windbreak—with the right choice of plants it can help control wildfires on the upwind side.

If you enjoy watching wildlife, by now you may have noticed which plants attract hummingbirds or colorful butterflies, You can literally *plant these in* to your design. *Cholchopia*,” the rufus-naped wrens with their lively choral duets in the morning and their voracious appetite for insects, will acquire resident status if you provide a plant that meets their modest nesting needs. More ambitious, but completely feasible is to plan a monkey corridor to a nearby grove of trees where they hang out. The right choice of structural and food trees will bring the Howlers close enough to impress your visitors from overseas.

Colors are important. You should have been doing your homework noting which native trees are pink in March, yellow in April, which vines have purple flowers in the day, or orange flowers at night. Working with native species or plants which are frequently seen in the gardens of Guanacastecos is one way to ensure a lower maintenance landscape—and more free time to enjoy it.

My recommended approach to planning a garden or landscape in Guanacaste is to aim to capture to the maximum extent possible the rain which falls on your site, devise means to impound and infiltrate it and plant in the resulting zones according to levels of humidity. This approach helps in both in your garden and in our water stressed region. You’ll use less irrigation water, build up your soil faster and save on driveway washouts and mud slides downhill from your house.

Gardeners with a scientific bent have had their soil tested by a lab and are looking at the depressing results. High acidity, low levels of potassium and calcium. Organic matter, the keystone of the soil ecosystem, is abysmally low. The legacy of the cattle culture means that the gardening culture has it’s work cut out for it. Many landscapers truck in vast amounts of “*tierra negra*”, the fertile dark soil from the valley bottoms. This is a temporary fix-it. The nut-sedge which invariably comes with it is one of the worst weeds in the world and the soil still needs work. A far better choice is compost and a steady effort to build up organic residues in the soil by mulching and simply burying the litter which is normally hauled off and burned.

GET SET

April and May are usually a good time of year to actually collect the organic matter which your neighbors are burning. My neighbors kids are currently out in the nearby pasture, filling sacks with dried cow patties. They charge me 250 colones per sack. Now is also a good time to gather seeds of native wildflowers which may have caught your eye. One of my favorites is the yellow *crotalaria*, called “chilindrin” locally, whose flowers resemble sweet peas. These can be scattered widely along with papaya and native tree seeds and you’ll get thousands of “volunteers” which can be transplanted, eliminated or slowly worked into your evolving landscape plan. Another hardy small tree with spectacular yellow flowers is probably growing already in the left over sand from any nearby building project. Known as *taragontin*, this cassia species keeps it’s leaves throughout the dry season, needs no watering, and allows enough light through the canopy to develop a mixed understory of other landscape elements.

At El Centro Verde, this is the time of year for earth work. The vegetable garden is on low maintenance, the rains are a ways off, and we are building more diversions, contour swales and catchments to deal with the water when it comes. Years of practice have boiled down to the following caveats about rain water in Guanacaste:

- I Stop it where it falls.
- II Slow it over and over again when it is moving
- III Plant the living daylight out of every square inch of ground to handle the occasional deluge. Putting this into practise will enable you to feel better than the neighbors when **your** son wakes up and exclaims, “Dad, we could do white water rafting in our yard!”

A creative approach to rule #1 was suggested by an engineer from the states. “Lawns can be shallow basins designed to capture and infiltrate runoff from house roofs.” An inch of rain gives 6 gallons of runoff per square meter of roof. A landscape design that makes the most of the 6 feet of rainfall per year is a logical approach given the water déficit in Guanacaste during the dry season.

Many homeowners opt for living fencerows to achieve more privacy and reduce the dust and noise from adjacent roads. In accord with local experience, one of the favorite plants is hibiscus, easily planted from cuttings when the soil is moist. You are a step ahead by preplanting the cuttings tightly packed into a small bed with loose soil during the dry season and keeping it continually moist. These will then form roots and be more sure to survive transplanting during the wet season and enter the next dry season with a larger—and deeper-- root system.

Before the rains come and you actually start to plant, there's just one more little detail. If the rains fail be ready to water. About 8 years ago the *veranillo*—the little summer which often occurs in the tropics just about when the sun reaches its northernmost latitude—caught many of us napping. Six weeks of blazing sun and howling Papagayo winds wreaked havoc on a 40,000 tree teak plantation which a friend of mine was trying furiously to water with buckets. Homeowners are luckier. Gallon bottles with pinholes can improvise drip irrigation on selected plants. Cheap polyethylene tubing similarly perforated can siphon out of barrels and irrigate long fencerows and other linear plantings. A bit of foresight, a hundred bucks worth of barrels, tubing and moveable perforated containers and you can sleep easier knowing that the wind and sun won't leave your dream landscape high and dry. This precaution is especially warranted given the prediction by the IMN, National Weather Institute, that the rainy season will start late. Given the El Niño phenomenon, the forecast is for less precipitation than usual.

Taking into account the above practices can help your planting efforts off to a good start. When the rains come, wait until you see that locals are planting corn. Experience is the best teacher and the accumulated wisdom of several thousand years of planting in this climate is as good a basis as any. Next month I'll provide some insights into planting techniques which will hopefully work as well for you as they do for me.

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