

Ask a Master Gardener

[Editor's Note: Each month the Help Desk's Quality Assurance Team selects outstanding responses to clients and places them in the Green Folder on the Help Desk's computer's desktop for review by its volunteers. We are highlighting these responses each month in **The Latest Dirt** so that **all** Master Gardeners can learn from them. For this end-of-the-year issue, we are offering two responses which the QA Team selected as the "Interesting Problems of the Month." Why not? You should have plenty of time now to read and enjoy the outstanding work of our fellow Master Gardeners, Sheila Weston and Martha Lee.]

Description of the client's problem:

I know that fava beans are planted in the fall at OUR GARDEN to help the soil. I am planning to try them this year in my garden. I bought some whole fava beans at the farmer's market and my question is, do I plant them green from the pod or do they need to be dried first?

Here is the advice Sheila gave to the client:

Thank you for your question to the UC Master Gardener Program Help Desk regarding planting fava beans. Favas are a great crop to grow over the winter, and you can cut them down in the spring when they just start to flower. They are then turned into the soil or you can add to your compost pile. By doing this, you are adding nitrogen and other nutrients to your soil. You can also let some of the plants mature if you like eating the beans!

In order to produce new plants, seeds need to mature enough to germinate before collecting, so I would not advise you to plant the beans you bought as they may not be mature enough to germinate. Now is a good time to plant favas and you can find seeds at your local nursery or online. Sow seeds six inches apart and two to three inches in depth. You should also pre-treat the seed with an inoculant which you can also purchase at the nursery. This helps the plant fix nitrogen from the air. To use the inoculant which comes as a powder, you moisten the fava beans in a container and sprinkle enough powder to coat the seeds. Plant the seeds soon after, not letting the seeds sit for a long time once inoculated.

Here are some tips from Master Gardener Janet Miller on growing cover crops:

- Prepare the bed by pulling out what's growing and loosely cultivate the soil. There is no need to add fertilizer but you may want to add some compost.
- When sowing seeds, give them space to grow.
- Most grasses and grains can be broadcast over an area. Some legumes, such as fava beans, must be planted after being inoculated.
- For sown seeds, cover them lightly with compost to keep the birds from eating them.
- Keep the seeds moist until germination. In the winter, our rains should provide all the irrigation the plants will need, but during dry spells and in summer, you may need to add supplemental water.

- There are two ways to handle a cover crop. When it is ready to harvest, cut it down and chop up the plant material to add to your compost pile. Or you can chop the plants finely and turn under in the garden soil where it will compost in the bed.
- After composting in place, leave the beds alone for about three weeks to give the plant material time to start breaking down. You can then plant seedlings into your bed. If you have seeds to plant, you may want to compost the cover crops in a bin first.
- Consider if your beds have specific issues. For soil that has been fallow, growing grains and grasses might provide the best results as the deeply rooting plants will help break up the hard soil.
- If your beds are nitrogen depleted, legumes will give you the most bang for your buck.
- You can grow both in the same bed, getting the best of both worlds.
- A number of stores sell cover crop seeds. A variety of seeds is available at OUR GARDEN on Wednesday mornings. <http://ccmg.ucanr.edu/OURGARDEN/>.
- Here is another link with some helpful information:
http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/The_Kitchen_Garden/Additional_KG_Articles/Green_Manure_Cover_Crops/.

I wish you success with planting a cover crop and let us know if you have any further questions.

Sheila Weston, 2009

And now, a second response from Martha Lee.

Description of the client's problem:

I would love some advice about plants to add to our garden. Do you have Master Gardeners who are willing to come to our house and provide that kind of advice?

Here is the advice that Martha gave the client:

Thank you for contacting the UC Master Gardener Program Help Desk. Unfortunately, we are unable to send Master Gardeners out for personalized home garden consulting. Our mission is to educate county residents about the various aspects of gardening to empower them to be better gardeners. We have many educational opportunities to help you learn more about your garden. The Master Gardener's website, <http://ccmg.ucanr.edu/>, is where you can find links to events and information about gardening in Contra Costa County.

OUR GARDEN is a public demonstration garden of the Contra Costa Master Gardeners, located in Walnut Creek at the corner of North Wiget Lane and Shadelands Drive, just off of Ygnacio Valley Road. Weekly speakers present a variety of informative talks from April through October on edible gardening and home gardening in general. Contra Costa Master Gardeners maintain the garden and interface with the general public. We encourage you to bring your home and garden problems and questions, and talk with a Master Gardener at the Ask a Master Gardener Table (9 am to noon).

We also offer presentations at many libraries throughout Contra Costa County. You can find listings of all Contra Costa Master Gardener outreach programs at: http://ccmg.ucanr.edu/Find_Us/.

Selecting plants for a garden can be overwhelming. If you have a specific plant need or would like our opinion on a plant you intend to use, please feel free to contact us. Meanwhile, below are recommended resources which can help you with plant selections.

Websites:

1. UC Davis All-Stars http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/plant_search.aspx. These are the top 100 plants from the UC Davis Arboretum based on toughness, reliability, ease of growth, low water requirements, and few problems with pests or diseases. This includes California natives and non-natives.
2. Contra Costa Water District <http://www.contracosta.watersavingplants.com/search.php>. This is a large database of plants appropriate for Contra Costa County, which includes natives and non-natives. The site has a strong search capacity.
3. Calscape <http://calscape.cnps.org>. This is a partnership between the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) and UC Berkeley Jepson Herbarium. The website contains natives only and some plants that are high users of water. Your search can be tailored by location.

Books:

1. The New Sunset Western Garden Book: The Ultimate Gardening Guide, edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel (New York, NY: Time Home Entertainment Inc., 2012). The Sunset Western Garden Book is a source for tips on varieties, growth habit, and special care requirements.
2. Plant and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates of the San Francisco Bay Region, by Nora Harlow (Oakland, CA: East Bay Municipal Utility District, 2005). This book put out by EBMUD has wonderful photographs, many showing the plants in garden settings. It also has summary information on each plant, including bloom time, sun and water needs. The pictures from the book are also available on-line at <http://summer-dry.com/search/>.
3. Landscape Plants for California Gardens: An Illustrated Reference of Plants for California Landscapes, by Bob Perry (Claremont, CA: Land Design Publishers, 2010). This comprehensive book is another excellent source of plant photos and information on plant selection.

I hope these suggestions prove helpful in your search for plants for your garden and let us know if you have any specific questions.

Martha Lee, 2013