

“Can You Help Me?”

Garden consultants can do anything from giving advice about plants to designing a garden.

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By Marilyn Dickey

Shortly after Laura Davis bought a house in Silver Spring, she and her sons planted 300 tulips. But just as the plants were about to bloom, deer ate all but ten of them. For the next couple of years, Davis bought books, took classes on gardening, and tried to create a beautiful yard, but the result always fell short.

She didn't want to hire a gardener; she wanted to do the work herself with the help of her sons. Then she saw a flier that landscape designer and garden consultant Connie Bowers, also of Silver Spring, had posted on the bulletin board of the local YMCA. Davis called her.

Bowers walked through the yard, looked at Davis's interior-decorating style, and asked what colors she liked and what she wanted in a garden. Then Bowers went home and drew up a computerized garden plan, adding snapshots and details about plant and light conditions and the care of each plant she was suggesting.

“It's a really accurate design plan where it's all laid out with the correct footage, including the patio and hot tub,” Davis says. The plan included plants that would bloom at different times over about seven months as well as flowers, shrubs, and herbs that deer find unappealing, such as holly, cotton lavender (santolina), thyme, and catnip (nepeta).

Davis and her sons went to work, and three years later their yard is a showpiece. “People say they go out of their way to drive by my house to see what's in bloom,” she says.

How to Be a Gardener

For \$40 to \$175 an hour, garden coaches and consultants will come to your home and do anything from design a garden to identify plants, explain why your azaleas won't bloom to teach you to prune bushes. Some are certified arborists and can advise you about trees as well. Consultants don't work only with beginners; even seasoned gardeners sometimes seek a second opinion or fresh ideas.

There's no formal distinction between a consultant and a coach, says Kathy Jentz, editor and publisher of Washington Gardener magazine, but those who call themselves consultants tend to have certificates or degrees in landscape design or horticulture, while coaches are generally people who have gardened for years and developed expertise that way as well as through research or volunteering in a community or botanical garden. But because not everyone uses the terms in the same way, this article uses the word “consultant” for both.

Susan Harris, who has gardened all her life, was president of the Takoma Horticultural Club in 2004 when a new member asked whether she knew someone who could offer pointers. Harris gave her a hand, and then that member started recommending her. Soon Harris was in business.

She suggests to clients how to create a new garden or improve the one they have. She can point out plants that would do well in your garden, tell you where to buy them, and help design the garden. “Maybe the unique thing about a coach as opposed to someone who has a degree,” says Harris, “is that I can teach you to be a gardener, not a horticultural expert.” As she puts it, she doesn’t know the answer to everything but knows where to find the answer.

When Patty First and her family moved to Takoma Park last June, she wasn’t a gardening novice but wanted to bounce ideas off someone more experienced, so she called Harris. She was glad she did. Harris told her which plants were right for the space and pointed out that tree roots were in the way of plants already there: “She didn’t give me this piece of paper saying, ‘This is what you need to do.’ She just gave me ideas. It was much more collaborative.”

Do It (Partly) Yourself

Not everybody who uses a consultant wants to do all the work. Bethesda landscape designer and consultant Barbara Katz says she creates “intense” gardens with lots of stonework, water features, and unusual plants. She has a small crew that does the planting.

But she also has customers who want to collaborate with her. “I have a number of customers who are passionate gardeners themselves but got lost in the process,” she says. “And in some cases I will say, ‘Let’s work on this and massage it together.’ ”

Karen Harris of Alexandria wanted someone to design and install a garden in most of the yard, but she wanted to plan and plant some of it herself. So she hired DC landscape designer/consultant Jane Berger.

“I did know I wanted a little cottage cutting garden,” Harris says, “but other than that I had no idea what I wanted—I don’t have that kind of vision.” She also wanted a yard that would have visual appeal all year, even in winter. Berger designed a patio surrounded by trees and bushes where something is flowering all season long.

For winter, Berger suggested several kinds of holly trees and bushes with bright-red berries as well as trees with beautiful bark; trees and shrubs with an interesting structure such as viburnum; evergreens; and winter jasmine, a viny shrub that produces yellow blossoms starting in late winter or early spring.

Before meeting Berger, Harris had planned to put in Leyland cypress trees to shield the view of the townhouses beyond her backyard, but Berger told her that Leyland cypress is prone to disease in this region. “They could do well for a while, and all of a sudden one of them will be gone,” Berger says.

Harris followed her advice and planted river birch trees instead. She loves the results: “They make a great screening canopy, and they have beautiful bark that peels off.”

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Is This a Weed?

Among the calls that Annapolis garden designer/consultant Nancy Lowry Moitrier gets from clients are questions about identifying plants in their yards.

Besides telling people about the plants they have, she says, “I’ll tell them things they didn’t know to watch out for.”

For example, a black-walnut tree gives off toxins, and only a few plants thrive under it. She says it’s important to find out what plants grow in what soils; skipping that step is a big gardening mistake. She adds that using good soil can go a long way toward creating a beautiful, easy-care garden.

One client wanted to know why his azaleas never bloomed. Moitrier asked what time of year he pruned it, and he said January. She replied that he’d just pruned off all the flower buds.

Moitrier urges clients to beware of “invasive exotic” plants—those that come from a different location and thus may harm the local environment. Some to watch out for, she says, are burning bush, Japanese stilt grass, and kudzu.

“Kudzu didn’t used to be so invasive in our climate,” Moitrier says. “Winters used to kill it back.” But with the area’s recent warmer winters, kudzu has taken over more of the land.

Foreign plants can also deprive butterflies and birds of nutrients they need by pushing out native plant populations.

Some exotic-invasive plants are fine if managed well, she adds. English ivy is one: “It’s very popular, but if it starts to climb up a tree, it becomes a mature form and birds carry the seeds to other locations.” But if you prevent the plant from climbing any structure, she says, it’ll never seed.

No Yard? No Problem

Even apartment dwellers sometimes need gardening tips for window boxes and patio containers, says Rebecca P. Cohen, a garden consultant in Vienna.

One client, Kristin Zucaro, wanted to keep her window boxes in bloom for as much of the year as possible to shield the view of a parking lot from the living-room windows.

“I wanted plants that were small, colorful, and could handle direct sunlight,” she says. “I’ve always had an interest in learning more about gardening, and I wanted to experiment and plant a few things on my own but wasn’t sure where to start. It is overwhelming to go into one of the large nurseries and know what is right for small window boxes.”

Cohen suggested pansies, candytuft, and creeping phlox for spring; wave petunias for summer—which love sunlight and moisture and whose flowers spill over the edge of the window boxes—and geraniums for the fall.

Catching Mistakes Early

One of the most valuable services that consultants can perform is warning people away from costly mistakes.

“This Saturday I was at a guy’s house, and all of his plants were overmulched,” says Barb Neal, a consulting arborist in Glen Echo. “The mulch was right up against the tree trunk. Those tissues in the tree are not as waterproof as some people think, and if they soften, then bores and fungi can attach to the tree much more easily.”

New gardeners often expect an instant garden, says Meriwether Rumrill, an Arlington garden designer and consultant, so they put plants close together and end up having to move them, take them out, or keep pruning them once they grow.

“Just wait and give them a couple of years,” she says. “The garden will be much healthier, and you’ll be happier in the long run.”

Eliminate pruning by buying plants of the right size, Jane Berger advises: “One of the classic mistakes that people make is planting something that’s too big, and they end up pruning it all the time.” Check out some of the dwarf plants developed in the past few years.

Putting the right plants in the right places can cut down on the use of chemicals, she adds: “If you put azaleas in full sun, they usually get lace bug, and there’s nothing you can do but spray them with chemicals. I don’t like to put any chemicals in the garden.”

For three years before Laura Davis, the Silver Spring mom, hired Connie Bowers, she learned through trial and error—placing plants too close together, choosing plants that didn’t do well in her yard and some that just didn’t look good together. She found using a garden coach to be a good financial move.

“You can spend a lot of money on gardening,” she says, “and if you aren’t doing it right the first time, you can end up spending another \$1,000 next summer doing it again.”

But Bowers gave her more than garden advice, says Davis: “One of the things she gave me the most is confidence.”