

Successful Shrubs for North Georgia Landscapes

By Clark McAlister

Plant material placed around your home is essential to a well-balanced landscape. However, conditions that surround your home's foundation are often the opposite of what most plants prefer.

Think about it – builders grade and compact soil so that it can hold up a home's foundation and footings. Concrete and masonry can leach excess limestone into the soil, causing high-pH conditions. Downspouts are positioned to drain large amounts of water from the roof back into small areas of soil. Dark siding, stone, or brick on southern or western exposures of the house can cause extreme temperature environments.

While essential for constructing a house that will last a long time, most building practices are detrimental to the plants we use when installing a landscape. Plants prefer uncompacted, airy soils, at pH levels that are closer to neutral, and areas free of standing water. It may seem challenging in our native clay soils - which are sticky, compact, acidic, and difficult to dig in - but it is possible. Here are some tips to achieve better landscape results in the future.

Soil Test. Have your soil analyzed for macronutrient content and pH level. Soil pH is vitally important to good plant growth. If the pH is out of the preferred range for your plants, they won't be able to access the nutrients in the soil. Normally we need to raise the pH up in our acidic soils, and this is done by amending soil with lime. Pair this with recommended nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium fertilizer additions, and your plants will thrive. Soil tests can be done through the local Extension Office.

Right Plant, Right Place. Match plants to their desired location in the landscape. Pay attention to sun and shade requirements when purchasing new plants. Check tags for mature height and place around your home accordingly. Nothing is more annoying than having to prune a shrub all season because it grew taller than the window it was planted beneath. Pay close attention to USDA Hardiness Zones when selecting plant material. Most of the Dawsonville area is Zone 7, although newer maps have us trending towards Zone 8.

Plant High, Never Die. When installing new plants, place the root ball a few inches above the grade of the surrounding soil. It might look silly, but our clay soils naturally settle after digging. Planting high accounts for the settling soil and assures roots don't get buried too deeply. Dig planting holes 2-3 times the size of the root ball and backfill to ensure roots grow well.

Easy on the Mulch and Water. Mulch is fantastic, but too much can kill. No more than three inches of mulch is necessary, and none should be touching the trunk or stems of plants. Too much mulch can lead to stem rot and early plant death. New plants should be watered daily for the first two weeks after planting (in absence of rainfall), and irrigation should be tapered off after that. More plants die from overwatering than from drought in Georgia. Check gutter downspouts and condensate drains to ensure they aren't dumping excess water onto plants.

Here are five suggestions for small evergreen shrubs for the Dawsonville area:

Distylium – ‘Vintage Jade’, ‘Coppertone’, ‘Cinnamon Girl’

Spreading plum yew – *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* ‘Prostrata’

Abelia – ‘Kaleidoscope’, ‘Rose Creek’

Doghobble – *Leucothoe fontanesiana*

Dwarf Chinese fringeflower – *Loropetalum chinense* – several good cultivars available