Getting Dirty with Glenn Garden Guide #102: Planting Beds

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Before You Dig

A professional looking planting bed does not take a magic touch or a bottomless budget. It takes seven steps done in the right order, and these are the same seven steps garden professionals use.

I am Glenn Rieker, and I have spent more than 45 years designing, building, and maintaining large residential and estate gardens in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Along the way I have made, fixed, or been hired to rescue nearly every mistake a planting bed can suffer, which is a polite way of saying this guide was paid for by experience.

Whether you are starting from scratch or upgrading an existing space, these steps will keep your yard polished, balanced, and well maintained while staying within budget. At the end you will find a bonus section on the most common DIY mistakes and a checklist to carry out to the garden.

Step 1: Choose the Right Location

The sun decides what will thrive in your bed, and it does not negotiate. Before you buy a single plant, watch how much sunlight the area gets throughout the day.

Light level	Daily sun	Good plant choices
Full sun	6 or more hours	Roses, lavender, ornamental grasses, native plants
Partial shade	4 to 6 hours	Hostas, hydrangeas, ferns
Full shade	Less than 4 hours	Astilbe, coral bells, native woodland species

Glenn's tip. Stand at your front door facing the yard and open the compass app on your phone. Take a screenshot and save it to your photos, and you will have a reference for sun location and the microclimates around your home.

Step 2: Define the Bed Shape Like a Pro

The edge of a bed sets the personality of the whole garden, so choose your line before you choose your plants.

Edge style	The look	Best for	Worth knowing
Curved	Natural and flowing	Informal or cottage style gardens	Curves can direct the eye to features in the garden
Straight	Modern and structured	Contemporary homes	Harder to lay out and maintain

Glenn's tip. Lay out your bed shape with a garden hose before you cut the edges. You can stand back, see the design, and adjust it before committing to anything.

White spray paint is another option, although it is harder to adjust. You do not need a continuous line, just a dot every 5 or 10 feet. Flour also works in a plastic bag with one corner cut off, though it can be hard to get it to pour evenly.

Step 3: Prepare the Soil for Long Term Success

Healthy soil makes healthy plants, and this is the step you only get one easy chance to do well. Remove grass and weeds completely to prevent future issues, then mix in organic compost to improve soil texture and drainage.

Soil type	How to improve it	Or work with it
Clay	Add sand and compost to loosen it up	Select plants that thrive in heavy soils
Sandy	Add organic matter to help retain moisture	Select plants that thrive in sandy soils

Quick test. Squeeze a handful of damp soil. If it crumbles easily under your thumb, it is well draining. If it stays in a tight ball, it needs improvement.



Step 4: Choose the Right Plants for Year Round Interest

A bed that looks good in only one month is a bouquet, not a garden. Build it in three layers, then add a finishing touch.

Layer	What to use	What it does
1. Foundation plants	Evergreens and shrubs	Provide year round structure and protection for birds
2. Seasonal interest plants	Perennials and annual flowers	Bloom at different times
3. Accent plants	Grasses and ornamental trees	Add height and movement
Finishing touch	A water feature of some type	Adds sound and movement to the garden

Glenn's tip. Choose native plants for low maintenance beauty and wildlife support.

Step 5: Plant with Proper Spacing and Depth

Dig each hole several inches wider than the plant or root ball, but no deeper. Gently loosen the roots before planting to encourage outward growth, which removes the chance of the roots simply growing in a ball.

Then follow the spacing recommendations, and I cannot emphasize this enough. Overcrowding leads to competition and disease. Proper spacing gives you air movement and room for plants to develop naturally, which minimizes the need for future characteristic pruning.

Glenn's tip. When planting perennials, annuals, or bulbs, cut a piece of PVC or lumber to a 12, 18, or 24 inch length and use it to lay out your plants quickly at the proper spacing. I call this the Idiot Stick.

Step 6: Edge, Mulch, and Maintain for a Polished Look

Clean edges make a huge difference, and they are the cheapest way to make a bed look expensive. Use a flat spade or edging tool to create a crisp border, then maintain that edge every few months for a professional finish.

Apply 2 to 3 inches of mulch to suppress weeds and retain moisture, and keep it away from plant stems to prevent rot. Apply a preemergent to all mulch at installation to keep weed seeds from germinating.

Mulch	Verdict	Why
Shredded bark	Best choice	Natural look; pine or hemlock here in the Midwest
Pine needles	Best choice	Great for acid loving plants
Stone mulch	Best choice	Suits modern and dry gardens
Stained mulch	Do not use	The dye can run off onto your concrete or water garden

Never use weed barrier. It prevents the mulch from decomposing into the soil and keeps the soil surface hard, which stops rain from moving into the soil.

Skip the stained mulch too. It removes nitrogen from the soil as it decomposes, and it tends to float off during a hard rain.

Step 7: An Easy Maintenance Plan for Year Round Beauty

A great bed is not finished on planting day; it is kept up in small visits. A few minutes on a regular rhythm beats one miserable Saturday.

When	What to do	Worth knowing
Weekly	Check soil moisture and water as needed	Especially important on newly installed plants
Weekly	Pull small weeds before they spread	Always easier after a rain
Seasonal	Trim dead leaves and flowers	Keeps the bed looking tidy
Seasonal	Apply fresh mulch	Do this each spring
Seasonal	Fertilize 2 to 3 times a year	A root drench is the best choice, or a foliar application early in the morning

Glenn's tip. Use a product like Moisture Manager to reduce watering needs by 50 percent. I have used it for over ten years with great success.

Bonus: Common DIY Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Choosing the wrong plants is the number one mistake made by all gardeners, unfortunately including most professional gardeners. It leads this list for good reason.

Mistake	The fix
Choosing the wrong plants	Research sun and shade needs before buying
Ignoring plant spacing	Follow the recommended spacing on the plant tags
Over mulching	Stick to 2 to 3 inches and keep mulch off the stems
Planting too deep	Plant at the same depth as the nursery pot

Take this checklist out to the garden with you.

- [ ] I tracked the sun and know how many hours this bed gets
- [ ] I saved a compass screenshot from my front door
- [ ] I laid out the shape with a hose, paint, or flour before cutting
- [ ] I removed all grass and weeds and mixed in compost
- [ ] I chose plants for the sun and soil I actually have
- [ ] I planned foundation, seasonal, and accent layers
- [ ] I dug holes wider than the root ball but no deeper
- [ ] I cut an Idiot Stick and spaced my plants with it
- [ ] I edged the bed and applied 2 to 3 inches of mulch, with no weed barrier and no stained mulch

About the Professional Gardener



Glenn Rieker has a degree in landscape architecture and more than 45 years of experience designing, building, and maintaining large residential and estate gardens in the Midwest and on the East Coast. He now helps DIY homeowners achieve professional results while avoiding the common pitfalls along the way.

Keep Growing

If you like these quick tips, you will love my in depth gardening courses and interactive Zoom workshops. Visit gettingdirtywithglenn.com for the complete list of courses, and join the crew at gettingdirtywithglenn.beehiiv.com. See you in the garden.

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