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**The Mendota Reporter**  
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During its growing season, a dandelion can effectively spread its seeds thanks in large part to the wind.

## Why weeds can be found everywhere

The ubiquitous nature of weeds can make them seem like they can grow anywhere, and that's because they can. Weeds can grow anywhere there's room for them to sprout, including gardens, sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots. One of the things that helps weeds spread so much is how productive they can be at producing seeds. An actively growing weed plant will produce thousands of seeds and disperse those seeds throughout the season.

One of the more recognizable weeds is the dandelion. During its growing season, a dandelion can effectively spread its seeds thanks in large part to the wind, which can blow seeds all over, thereby allowing a single dandelion to spread its seeds far and wide.

Penn State Extension notes that successful weed plants share many characteristics, including an ability to reproduce both sexually and asexually. Successful weed plants also are clever in terms of getting around, as their seeds can attach to people and animals and even float on water.

Weeds also put up a fight when they're confronted by humans. Humans who try to pull weeds may instead break them. The broken weeds can then resprout, ultimately spreading their seeds again. The resiliency of weeds also is evident in their ability to stay dormant for long periods of time. For example, weeds can stay in the soil for years before germinating, proving that these unwelcome guests aren't just pesky, but also patient.

## A lesson in building a backyard retaining wall

Flat, even landscapes are often coveted in backyards. However, flat backyards are not always so easy to find. Fortunately, varied terrain does not mean that certain landscaping plans are entirely off limits, especially for homeowners willing to build retaining walls.

Retaining walls help turn steep slopes in a yard into terraced focal points. They also can reduce soil erosion in hilly areas and can be used for aesthetic purposes, like raised planters, or to create more usable space within the yard. When an inground pool or pond is cut into a backyard hill, a retaining wall helps keep the remaining portion of that hill from collapsing into the cut-away area.

When contemplating retaining wall projects, a lesson in physics and engineering may be needed. A sturdy and long-lasting retaining wall needs to be built in a way that will take into consideration the force of the soil and the point at which the soil will begin to slide away, advises the experts at The Family Handyman. If these calculations seem beyond the scope of your ability, installation of a retaining wall is a job best



Retaining walls help turn steep slopes in a yard into terraced focal points.

left to a professional. If you are ready to forge ahead, these tips can get you started. However, it's important to note the potential benefits of working with others who have already built a retaining wall.

- Safety first: Call to have underground utilities plotted and marked before beginning any excavation.

- Map out your trench and begin to dig. The trench should have a level, compacted base as it will be the foundation for which the retaining wall materials, be they blocks, bricks or wood, sit in. A crushed stone base will help anchor the courses and serve to promote drainage. The Family Handyman says to bury the first course of the retaining wall one-tenth the height of the wall to prevent soil behind it from pushing the bottom out.

- Check for level. When placing blocks or timbers, make sure they are even with the first and periodically check for level as you go.

- Stagger and set back. The next row of blocks or material should be positioned so that the joints are

staggered for blocks, bricks or wood. A masonry blade will be needed to cut the harder materials; a circular saw will cut timber. Also, work against gravity by setting the second course slightly back from the first to help push back against the soil that is trying so hard to push forward. Repeat the process as each level is placed. Many retaining wall products are made with a lip to create this set back.

- Go with the grade. For especially steep slopes, a gradual step-up design may be more secure and more appealing than a very tall retaining wall. Each level of a stepped design should be done like the first.

- Backfill with stone for drainage. Using a layer of stone behind the retaining wall can help successfully direct water away so it will not increase the weight of the soil behind the wall and push against the retaining wall.

Retaining walls serve different purposes in a yard. Building such a wall requires planning and careful execution to ensure the job is done correctly.

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# 8 garden tools for beginners

The right tool for the job is essential to working safely and efficiently. This is as true in the workplace as it is in the garden.

Novice gardeners may not know where to begin in regard to which tools they need. The following are eight items that can serve as a solid foundation for beginning gardeners.

1. Gloves: Your hands will be working hard, so it pays to protect them from calluses, blisters, splinters, insects, and dirt. Look for water-resistant gloves that are also breathable.

2. Hand pruners: Hand pruners are essential for cutting branches, cleaning up shrubs, dead-heading flowers, and various other tasks. Choose ergonomic, no-slip handles that will make work easier. Rust-resistant, nonstick blades also are handy.

3. Wheelbarrow: A wheelbarrow can transport gear to garden beds or tote dirt, leaves, rocks, and other

materials around the landscape. A good wheelbarrow is strong but light enough to maneuver when full.

4. Loppers: Long-handled loppers will fit the bill for thick branches. The long handles provide leverage to cut through branches an inch or more in diameter.

5. Hand trowel: A hand trowel is a handy tool that lets you dig holes or unearth weeds. While shopping for a trowel, consider getting a hand-held garden fork, which can aerate soil and cut through roots.

6. Hose/watering can: Keeping gardens hydrated is part of ensuring their health. That makes a hose and a watering can two invaluable tools to have around. Invest in a lightweight, expandable hose if storage space is at a premium. An adjustable nozzle will enable you to customize the water flow as needed. A watering can is an easy way to tote water to hard-to-reach pots and containers.

7. Garden kneeler: Gardeners often bend and kneel while working in the soil. That puts pressure on the back and knees. A comfortable garden kneeler with memory foam or one made from shock-absorbing material can reduce aches and pains.

8. Garden hoe: Garden

hoes till soil, remove weeds and perform many other tasks. A garden hoe can be used along with a full-sized shovel, trowel and garden rake.

This list is just the tip of the garden tool iceberg. Visit a garden center and speak with a professional about other tools that can be added to the mix.

The Garden Bug

Common blue violet

This modest wildflower is native to many areas in the central and eastern United States. It favors shady woods, thickets, streambanks and small nooks in home gardens. It shows off its delicate blue-violet blossoms on thin stems from late March or April until the heat of summer intensifies in July and August.

Source: plants.usda.gov



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Voles eat mainly vegetarian diets, which makes vegetable gardens prime targets for these small rodents.

## Signs that voles are invading your garden

All sorts of uninvited guests can compromise the look and vitality of a garden. Some gardens are trampled by foot traffic, while others are plagued with weeds. Still others are plagued by small, tunnel-building rodents known as voles.

Voles are often confused with moles. While they do bear some similarities, namely that both travel through lawns and gardens via tunnels, voles and moles are not one and the same. In fact, moles are not even rodents.

The Old Farmer's Almanac notes that voles eat mainly vegetarian diets. That makes vegetable gardens prime targets for these small rodents that some mistake for mice. But Pests.org, a comprehensive resource for anyone looking to learn about pests and the threats they pose, notes that voles' eyes and ears are considerably smaller than the eyes and ears of mice. In addition, voles' tails are much shorter than the tails on mice.

Correctly diagnosing issues is essential to maintaining a healthy garden, and identifying vole infestations is no exception. The following are some signs that typically indicate a lawn or garden has been infested with voles.

- **Shallow tunnels throughout the property:** Voles create shallow tunnels between one and two inches wide, and these tunnels can typically be found all over the lawn. Grass stems and blades are part of voles' diets, so don't just look to the garden for signs of vole infestation.

- **Markings on bark and plants:** Pests.org notes that voles may leave small gnaw marks on bark and plants. A careful inspection of trees and other plants may be necessary to uncover this symptom.

- **Partially eaten root vegetables:** Voles may eat root vegetables like carrots and potatoes by pulling them down into their tunnels. The result is partially eaten vegetables in the garden.

- **Damaged trees and shrubs:** Voles don't limit their victims to grass and root vegetables. Young trees and shrubs that are leaning over may have fallen victim to vole infestations.

Homeowners can employ various strategies to control and prevent vole infestations. But first they must be certain the unwanted guests tunneling their way through their lawns and gardens are, in fact, voles.



For a safe, productive season of outdoor activities and chores, be sure to always store and use fuel properly.

## Do's and don'ts of outdoor fuel use

(StatePoint) With stay-at-home measures in place, you may find yourself with extra time for getting a jumpstart on outdoor seasonal chores.

But first, you'll need to fuel up, as gasoline, kerosene and diesel fuel are all required for outdoor tasks like removing fallen tree limbs and power washing driveways. Follow this advice from the experts at a leading container company to use fuel properly and safely.

### Dispose of Old Fuel

"Safely dispose of any leftover fuel in containers from winter activities," says Daniel Marshall, vice president of marketing and business development with a leading container company. "Winter fuel is heavier, and a unique blend. Fuel available in spring and summer is different and should be used for lawn care and sporting equipment."

You can safely dispose of a winter mix of gasoline, Marshall notes, by carefully funneling it into your car so that a small amount of remaining winter fuel will mix in with the gasoline in your larger tank.

### Selecting Containers

Inspect your existing fuel containers for cracks and leaks. If you find

signs of aging, invest in new, durable fuel containers. Many containers are available in one-, two- and five-gallon gas, kerosene and diesel sizes, made from high-density polyethylene that have child safety features for added protection.

### Do's and Don'ts

Before using fuel around the house, review this "do's and don'ts list" with your family:

Do...

- Use fuel outside only, in well-ventilated areas where you won't breathe in the fumes.

- Remove fuel containers from vehicles before refilling.

- Place containers on the ground a safe distance from vehicles when refilling.

- Touch the container with the gas dispenser nozzle before removing the container lid to ground the static electricity charge.

- Keep the nozzle in contact with the container when filling it to prevent build-up of static charge.

- Carefully wipe away fuel spills, either during the filling of the container or when using the container.

- Store fuel in their proper containers. Universally, red containers are for gasoline, blue are for kerosene and yellow are for diesel.

- Let a hot motor cool before adding more fuel.

### Don't...

- Siphon any type of fuel by mouth.
- Allow children near fuel containers.

- Store filled fuel containers in a vehicle or living space, like a home or trailer.

- Bring fuel containers near open flames, whether it be pilot lights or stoves.

- Bring, store or use fuel near any source of ignition.

- Smoke when using fuel or when near fuel containers.

- Remove or alter the FMD inside the opening of the container.

- Pour fuel directly onto or near a flame, coals or embers. Fuel should never be used to start or accelerate a fire.

- Use any type of fuel to kill ant hills or bee hives.

For a safe, productive season of outdoor activities and chores, be sure to always store and use fuel properly.



Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

## Mulching mistakes to avoid

Landscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal.

Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that's not protected by mulch, homeowners won't have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won't be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds.

Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

- Not enough mulch: Mulch is ineffective when spread too thin. The Virginia

Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

- Poorly located mulch: Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

- Failing to mulch to the drip line: The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree's canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

- Failing to weed before mulching: Weeds should be removed prior to mulching. If they're not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you're trying to create for your plants and trees.

Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

## Tips to successfully grow tomatoes

Slicing into the first tomato of the season is a much-anticipated moment for gardeners. Tomatoes are among the most popular fruit or vegetable plants grown in home gardens. Much of that popularity may be credited to the fact that red, ripe tomatoes have a delicious, juicy flavor that serves as the basis for all sorts of recipes. And since tomatoes can just as easily be grown in a full backyard garden or in a container on a patio or balcony, tomatoes appeal to gardeners regardless of their living situations.

While tomatoes are relatively easy to grow, they are prone to certain problems and pests. Knowledge of what to expect when planting tomatoes and how to start off on the right footing can help produce a season's worth of delicious bounty.

- Wait until after the last average frost date. Tomatoes can be grown from seeds outdoors in warm areas, but tomato gardeners often find success starting seeds indoors six to eight weeks before the last frost date. Gradually introduce seedlings to the elements for a few hours each day, increasing the duration of time outside. Then they can be transplanted outdoors when temperatures are consistently over 60 F.

- Choose a sunny spot. Tomatoes love to soak up



sunlight. Place the plants in a sunny spot so they can thrive.

- Space out plants. The experts at Better Homes and Gardens say to leave anywhere from 24 to 48 inches between plants to accommodate for growth and ensure the plants will not get stunted.

- Plant deeply. Tomatoes tend to root along their stems. If transplants are long and lean, dig a trench and lay the stem sideways in the dirt, and then bend the top of the plant upward. Snip off the lower branches and cover with soil up to the first set of leaves. This will produce extra root growth and stronger, more vital plants.

- Give the plants support. Tomato cages or stakes can help keep the leaves and fruit from touching the ground, which can cause rot

and, eventually, death to the tomato plant.

- Lay down a layer of mulch. Tomatoes grow best when the soil is consistently moist. Mulch can help retain moisture from watering and rain. Mulch also will help prevent soil and soilborne diseases from splashing on the leaves and plants when it rains. While you amend the soil, make sure that it drains well and is slightly acidic.

- Prune away suckers. Tomatoes produce "suckers," which are leaves that shoot out from the main stem. Removing these leaves promotes air circulation and keeps the plant's energy focused on growing fruit.

Tomatoes are a rich addition to any garden. A few simple tricks can help even novice gardeners grow delicious tomatoes.

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## What to do about an overfertilized lawn

Lush lawns are not achieved without a lot of hard work. That hard work often involves some trial and error, and one of the simplest errors a person can make is overfertilizing a lawn.

Overfertilization is an easy mistake to make, but it's a mistake that can have long-lasting consequences. According to the lawn care experts at Scotts®, overfertilizing a lawn can damage grass. Overfertilized lawns are subject to excessive leaf growth, which may require more maintenance, like extra mowing, in the interim. Over time, an overfertilized lawn can develop a sponge-like feel and may be increasingly vulnerable to fungal disease.

Of course, homeowners can only address an overfertilized lawn after they learn to spot signs that the lawn has been fed too much fertilizer. Brown and patchy grass is one of the tell-

tale signs that a lawn has been overfertilized. This can occur because too much nitrogen has made its way onto the lawn. Scotts® notes that nitrogen greens up grass and helps it grow, but too much nitrogen can scorch the lawn, making it brown and patchy.

Minimal growth after fertilization is another indicator of overfertilization. Some lawns that have been overfertilized may not grow at all afterward.

Blackened or limp grass and crusting of fertilizer on the top of the soil are other symptoms of overfertilization.

When fertilizing a lawn, it's important that homeowners recognize that many products are now slow-release fertilizers. Packaging will indicate if your fertilizer fits this mold, and if it does, don't be surprised if results are not immediate.

Slow-release fertilizers can help with lawns where the soil does not drain especially well. Give these fertilizers time to do their job and resist the temptation to apply more fertilizer.

If a lawn has indeed been overfertilized, homeowners can remove any fertilizer they see on top on the soil. Once the fertilizer has been removed, water the lawn heavily, which can wash any remaining residue away. Watering daily in the ensuing days can remove any lingering fertilizer and reduce the likelihood that a lawn will develop issues with fungus.

Fertilizing a lawn involves carefully adhering to manufacturer instructions. If a lawn is overfertilized, removing fertilizer on the soil and heavily watering the lawn can help restore it to health and reduce the risk for disease.



Homeowners can only address an overfertilized lawn after they learn to spot signs that the lawn has been fed too much fertilizer.



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When planting shade trees, one of the first decisions homeowners will need to make is which type of tree, deciduous or evergreen, they want to plant.

## Tips when planting shade trees

Beautiful landscaping can add instant curb appeal to a property. But beauty isn't the only thing that makes idyllic landscaping attractive to homeowners. Some landscaping features, such as shade trees, save homeowners money while adding aesthetic appeal.

The U.S. Department of Energy notes that shading is the most cost-effective way to reduce solar heat gain in a home. Shading also cuts air conditioning costs, which tend to be expensive in areas with warm, humid climates. In fact, the DOE notes that well-planned landscapes can reduce unshaded homes' air conditioning costs by anywhere from 15 to 50 percent.

When planting shade trees, one of the first decisions homeowners will need to make is which type of tree, deciduous or evergreen, they want to plant. Deciduous trees are those that seasonally shed their leaves, while evergreens are trees that keep their leaves throughout the year. Deciduous trees can help keep homes cool in the summer by blocking sun, and those same trees can be beneficial in winter after they shed their leaves by letting the sun in and keeping homes warm. But evergreens also can be beneficial in winter by blocking wind, potentially preventing cold air from making its way into a home through cracks in walls or around windows.

When planting shade trees, techniques vary depending on which type of tree homeowners ultimately choose to plant.

### Planting deciduous trees

The DOE says that deciduous trees that are between six and eight feet tall when planted will begin shading the windows of a home within a year of being planted. Depending on

the species of the plant and the home, those same deciduous trees may begin shading the roof within five to 10 years of being planted. When planting deciduous trees, homeowners should keep these tips in mind.

- Plant trees to the south of the home. When planted to the south of the home, deciduous trees can screen between 70 and 90 percent of the summer sun while still allowing residents to feel summer breezes.

- Consider sun angles. Homeowners who want to shade their homes from low afternoon sun angles should plant trees with crowns that are lower to the ground on the west side of their homes.

- Cool air before it reaches your home. Shrubs and groundcover plants can be planted to cool air before it reaches a home.

### Evergreen trees

Planting evergreens to block wind is known as "windbreaking," which lowers the wind chill near a home. Wind also can be used to cool a home in summer. But these benefits can only be realized when evergreens are strategically planted.

- Location, location, location: The DOE advises planting evergreen trees to the north and northwest of the home to stop wind. In addition, to get the most bang for your windbreaking buck, the distance between the home and windbreak should be two to five times the height of the mature tree.

- Plant trees on either side of the house. Planting trees on either side of the house will direct cooling winds toward the home in the summer.

Shade trees can help homeowners reduce their energy bills, making them valuable and attractive additions to any landscape.

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