

Cure your black thumb

By Carol Johnstone
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Have you ever wondered what to do if you have a black thumb?

Well, this is a good time of year to begin, says Ross Godfrey, owner of Lakeland Plant World in Dartmouth.

And to begin, you've got to start by looking at your ground.

"Whether it's just the layout of the garden, of what you want where, or whether it's a matter of how many beds you're going to have," Mr. Godfrey says. "You should sit down this time of year, January or February, in the off season, and scrawl on a piece of paper."

Mr. Godfrey says the first thing he asks a prospective gardener is "how big an area do you have? Because we have to know how many plants you need."

So measure your lot. Look at a map and find out which way is north, because most plants don't do well on the north side of a house where there's not much sun.

"You should put your plants at least four feet from the house, unless it's a vine, of course, and you want it to climb up the building," he says.

"Just drive around and you see these evergreens that are growing against the house and they're trying to lean out, or the owner puts an upright kind of plant underneath the eaves and then they have to keep chopping it off, because it's hitting the eaves of the house."

He says when you first come to Plant World, if you "have a picture of the front of the house, or the yard, that helps too, with somebody standing in it, so we can get perspective."

Next, you need to work with the soil.

"If you're a good gardener, you're a patient gardener. None of this stuff comes quick," Mr. Godfrey says.

He says the soil in Halifax isn't very good.

"Ninety per cent of the time, you have to amend the soils that are there or bring in new soil, because what soil we do have is very poor. It's very old, old soil that's been depleted."

For plants to grow, you need soil that is friable and loose, so the plant's

very fine, hairy root system has enough room to grow.

"After you've dug your soil and worked it up, if you cannot take your hand and push your it down into the soil six to eight inches without hurting your fingers, then your soil's not ready for plants."

One way to develop your soil is to make your own compost. Mr. Godfrey and his staff can show you how.

"That's a benefit of going to an independent garden centre. Hopefully we are able to provide you with some information to go along with your purchase," he says.

Lakeland Plant World is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, so they have a wealth of experience to draw upon.