

How Plant-Healthy Is Your Yard?

WALK THROUGH any neighborhood and it seems every yard has a different level of greenness, weeds and bare spots. What gives? Turns out, yard and garden ecosystems are tricky to diagnose—the answers can be, quite literally, underground. To assess your yard's health, take this quiz. What you learn might surprise you.



1 HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU TEST YOUR SOIL?

- A. You can test your soil?
- B. Every year
- C. Every three years
- D. B or C, depending

Answer: D. Understanding your soil helps you add the right nutrients. Gretel Anspach, a Massachusetts Horticultural Society trustee, says to test annually until healthy, then every three to five years.



2 WHAT PORTION OF YOUR TREES, SHRUBS AND FLOWERS ARE NATIVE TO YOUR AREA?

- A. Most
- B. Some
- C. None
- D. I don't know

Any answer except C is acceptable. But in general, choose native plants. They support an array of native wildlife, which promotes a healthy ecosystem.



3 WHEN YOU SEE A FEW DANDELIONS IN YOUR LAWN, YOU:

- A. Pull them out.
- B. Bust out the herbicide.
- C. Enjoy the splash of color.
- D. Hit them with a golf club.

The only wrong answer is B. "Everything we spray that ends with '-cide' kills something, and that has ripple effects," Anspach says. Either pull the dandelions or leave them.



4 HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHAT TO PLANT?

- A. The amount of sunshine
- B. The size of the space
- C. The quality of the soil
- D. What will look prettiest

The only wrong answer is D. "If you plant with optimal growing conditions, you've taken a huge step forward," says Julie Weisenhorn, University of Minnesota Extension Service horticulture educator.



5 WHAT DEPTH OF MULCH DO YOU APPLY AROUND PLANTS?

- A. A couple of inches
- B. A good 3 to 5 inches
- C. Pour it on! 6 to 8 inches

Answer: B. Too much mulch can keep rain from reaching the soil, and too little won't inhibit weeds or cool the soil enough, says Jason Graves, a horticulture extension agent at Kansas State University.



6 DO YOU ...

- A. Avoid pesticides?
- B. Plant both early- and late-blooming plants?
- C. Leave plant stems standing through winter?
- D. Plant flower variety?

The more yeses, the more you're doing to support pollinating insects, which are "essentially propagating plants by keeping them going," Weisenhorn says. —*Pamela Schmid*



Trash to Treasure

Find value in what others throw away

YOU'RE DRIVING along and spot an old bookcase on the curb. Should you get it or forget it? A guide: **Prefab? Pass.** Look for solid, well-built pieces that can be refinished, says blogger and furniture artist Denise Zdziennicki, who runs the website Salvaged Inspirations. **Take a close look.** Give the piece a wobble test and inspect for any cracks, splits or broken wood, Zdziennicki advises.

Have some vision. "Light scratches and outdated hardware or furniture feet are easy to fix or swap out," Zdziennicki says. **Know when to say no.** See water damage, mold or significant structural defects? Leave it. And be wary of upholstered items in general because of the possibility of bedbugs.

Sell the stuff? If a find isn't right for you, try selling it at a resale shop or an online marketplace. Learn what sells dependably, then keep an eye out for those items, says New York-based appraiser Helaine Fendelman.



—*Marie Proeller Hueston*

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