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**For Immediate Release**

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### **A New Planting Season**

*Margaret Murphy, Horticulture Educator and Regional Food Coordinator*

I sometimes get asked how to create a no-maintenance garden. While I don't believe there is such a thing, there are steps we can take to help create a lower-maintenance and more sustainable landscape.

The definition of sustainable landscaping varies but, generally speaking, it means to use resources in a way that will meet our needs today while preserving environmental health and resources for future generations. A sustainable garden is one that thrives with minimal inputs such as water, fertilizer and pesticides. This not only reduces environmental impacts but can also help us save on time, labor and money.

When planning your garden beds this season, consider what can be done to promote total plant health and reduce the need for inputs such as fertilizers and pest controls.

The first step is to keep soils healthy. If your soil is healthy, your plants will get off to a good start and be more resilient to environmental stress or disease. Almost all soils can benefit from the addition of organic matter. Organic matter feeds those microorganisms that work so hard in your garden. It also improves the water and nutrient-holding capability of the soil. Sources for organic matter include compost, grass-clippings (untreated with herbicides), shredded leaves, or aged manure. A soil test can help determine if you need to supplement with fertilizer.

Water usage is another area where we can incorporate good conservation habits. Choose plants with low-water requirements (once established). Wait until plants need watering then water deeply and avoid watering too frequently. Group together plants with similar watering needs to make it easier to water plants only when necessary. Make good use of mulch to help hold soil moisture and reduce evaporation. Water your garden beds in the early morning instead of mid-day when much of the water is lost to evaporation or use soaker hoses or drip irrigation instead of sprinklers to more efficiently get water directly to the root zone.

When it comes to pest management, follow the old adage 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.' This involves doing what you can to keep plants healthy and vigorous. Healthy plants have less risk of developing problems. So when installing new plantings, it's important to keep in mind 'right plant, right place'. Using plant species well adapted to the local environment and well suited to their specific site will often reduce the need for pesticides as well as for water, fertilizer and labor. A

plant placed in an unsuitable location becomes stressed and then vulnerable to disease and other problems.

Lastly, plant a diverse landscape. That way if a pest or disease problem does arise, hopefully, the whole garden bed won't be in jeopardy. If a problem does develop and you are wondering about the best course of action for management, give your local County Extension Office a call. We are happy to help.

If you want to learn more about pest management, join me and fellow Master Gardeners for a program on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) on Saturday, May 19 from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Lyon County Extension Office in Rock Rapids. The goal of IPM is to provide safe, effective, economical and environmentally sound pest management.

To view garden and local food programs we have coming up this season, please visit Lyon, O'Brien, Osceola or Sioux County websites or the Flavors of Northwest Iowa website.

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