

Spencer Reid

DURHAM, N.C.

Of the many things that shaped Spencer Reid's gardens over the years, two influences stand out above and beyond any others—his mother and his 20 years working in a private greenhouse.

At 95 years old, Reid has spent many years working in a garden of some sort, whether it was his mother's vegetable garden, the gardens of his employer's estate or his own plot of land. Today Reid has had to downsize his efforts somewhat, but he still gets out and plants vegetables every year and tends to his immaculate flower beds. Gardening is a way of life for Reid, and plants are something he can't imagine living without.

As a child growing up in North Carolina in the years before the Great Depression, Reid's list of chores included helping out in the household kitchen garden, just like many of his other friends. But in addition to greens, tomatoes, potatoes and squash, his mother's garden included plenty of flowers. "She loved the flowers, especially sunflowers," Reid said. "I guess I picked up a lot of my gardening knowledge from her."

It might have been that love for flowers and the inheritance of a green thumb that led Reid to a job managing a greenhouse for a large private estate for 20 some years.

"It was a good-sized greenhouse," Reid said. In addition to using the facilities to raise bedding plants for the landscape, it was also a home for hothouse flowers such as orchids and carnations, which were used to create beautiful bouquets for the inside of the house.

Those years in the greenhouse have paid off in gardening success for Reid. This year's vegetable garden produced watermelons that grew as big as 50 pounds, even with the drought conditions Reid suffered in Durham just like the rest of the Southeast.

"How did I get them to grow like that? I start them early in little pots in the house," Reid said. Even without a true greenhouse of his own, Reid uses the same techniques to give all of his plants an early start, which gets them growing strong during the cooler and hopefully wetter days of late spring and early summer.

Reid's other ingredient in his recipe for success in the garden is using plenty of mulch. "Whenever I clean off the yard I rake up the leavings, put them in a pile and use them for next year," he said. The fall is a great time to start a mulch pile. Reid suggests putting down a layer of leaves, soaking them with water, and then adding another layer. "Just be sure not to use those




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leaves until they're about a year old," Reid said. "What you rake up this year should be ready to use next spring."

Reid reports that his layers of mulch help keep from having to water the garden so much, and he attributes the mulch to helping his vegetables weather the summer in fine form.

The habits picked up from his mother and the formal gardening he learned at the greenhouse seem to be just a part of the innate knowledge that has made Spencer Reid a gardener at heart all of these years. His advice proves that there's something about gardening that you just have to feel; it's tricky to teach.

"Gardening is more than just putting plants in the ground," Reid said. "You have to know when to root them and when to cut them off." Just like raising children, getting plants to flourish is all about nurturing them and then letting them go. 

— by Karen M. Alley

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