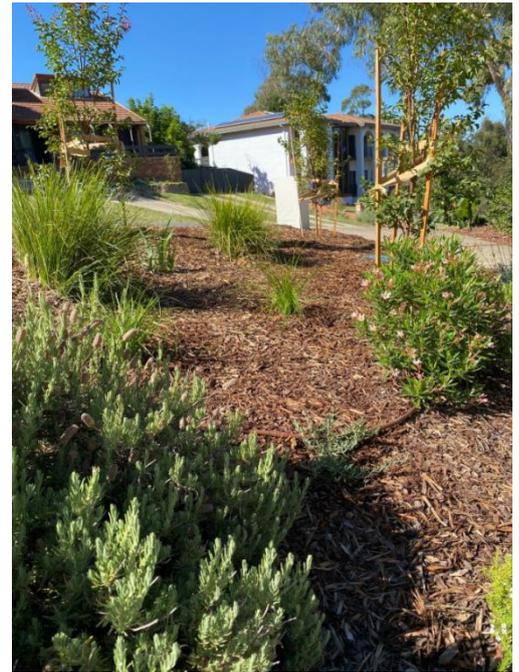


## Adaptive gardening

I spent much of the weekend gardening. Or more specifically I spent much of the weekend providing labour to the horticulture adviser in my household, a.k.a. my wife. Last month we had the garden 'landscaped' by professionals, a deal which included the delivery of 65 small trees, shrubs, and other sundry plants, all in flowerpots of varying sizes. Our job (which turned out to be my job) was to plant them. I have no training in gardening, nor do I claim to know anything about it. To date my tasks have been limited to mowing the lawn and... errr, that's it. However, I agreed my terms of reference and set about the task on a lovely sunny late summer's morning. Helpfully, my adviser had laid out all the plants (front of house, back of house) with the gardening centre's implementation instructions clipped neatly to each flower pot.

The first issue that confronted me was plant selection. Which ones should be planted where? The instructions were flimsy: "plant in good soil and water immediately". Even I could intuit this. I had lots of nice plants and lots of virgin soil, but there was no blue-print plan for me to follow. So now at my feet were many lovely plants; some had short spiky leaves, while others had flat olive-coloured leaves. Some had flowers, some didn't. They were all very beautiful, and the instructions promised amazing results. But I had no idea which ones should be planted where? Which ones preferred the shade and which the sun? which ones should be planted against the wall of the house? How deep should they be planted in the soil? How much fertiliser should I use – and how regularly?

On digging the holes for the plants, I found the quality of the soil varied greatly. Some was thick and full of clay and seemed to hold the water, while in other parts of the garden the soil was dry and crumbly. Which plants would thrive in which soil? It occurred to me that the context in which the plant was planted could matter greatly. The instructions said nothing about this. They contained no decent theory of how each plant would grow over time, and what were its preferred conditions. It seemed to be just assumed that each plant would grow just fine. There was no guidance regarding how to handle all these variables, and I didn't have the experience or the knowledge to make these selection and planting decisions. I was worried that I would be blamed if any of the plants died.



So, I went to ask my adviser, but discovered that she had gone into Canberra Civic Centre to meet other advisers and horticulture specialists to talk about gardening over numerous skinny flat whites. Her cell 'phone went through to voice mail saying to leave a message and she would get back to me. But by then of course it would be too late. I would have planted them. So, I ploughed ahead - literally and metaphorically.

Once in the ground my next task was to worry about watering requirements. I was unsure which plants liked water and which ones didn't. And if I was going to water them, should this be immediately after planting or at the end of the day once the sun had gone down? And how would I be able to tell if a plant needed water, or if it is being attacked by some horrible fungus? I am a mere labourer, not a horticulturalist. Surely, I cannot be expected to be responsible for the ongoing health and maintenance of all these plants? I am not sufficiently skilled to know when they may need digging up and replanting in a different part of the garden. My tools are simple and effective but only for planting – I have some good quality spades, trowels, and forks, but that is all. By this time, I was pretty frustrated that my adviser had not returned my call. I began to wonder if she had ever planted a garden in her life, or did she just spend her time advising others on planting and horticulture. As the sun began to set (it was a long day) I was getting rather frustrated that I was being asked to take responsibility for things way beyond my competence. I am a labourer in the vineyard, not a horticulturalist!

Eventually I caught up with my adviser – she was spending a lot of time in a garden down the road which is owned by another labourer – but her advice was reassuring. It seems that there are five good practice habits:

first, ensure all the plants have the basic resources they need to grow - water, some fertiliser maybe, possibly bug-spray if required; second, look over the plants frequently and regularly (ideally daily but certainly weekly) to see if they are growing or if they appear to be faltering; third, do the research to see what sort of environment each specific plant needs; fourth, don't be afraid to dig the weedy looking ones up and replant them somewhere else in the garden; and fifth, expect at least a few of the 65 plants to die. That's horticulture as I now understand it...