

Life is hard for pavement packed plants

Gardeners get irked when plants refuse to step up and overcome challenging situations. But plants themselves often face more than frustration when forced into daunting settings; they can die. Or, worse to gardeners, languish and look terrible.

Ghastly sites for plants include dense shade with tree root competition, heavy clay or exposed subsoil, dry slopes, and low areas that are boggy all winter but dry into cracked dust in the summer. Oh, and the low humidity and light of offices, or atop the television.

But the worst of all is a challenge I'm facing this week, of helping neighborhood improvement leaders sort out a serious eyesore. During a much-needed re-vamping of a major street, over a mile of new sidewalk was laid, with unsuitable plants shoehorned into two-foot wide ribbons between pavement and curbs.

No question, barriers be-

tween people and traffic are useful. Beyond increasing pedestrian safety, they keep fire hydrants, street signs, mailboxes, utility poles, and garbage cans out of the way of walkers, and reduce the amount of muddy "road splash" flung onto people by cars after a rain.

For practical reasons those areas might best be paved, bricked, or cobblestoned; however, they often get sodded with lawn grasses which require constant mowing, edging, and watering, or get weedy and require herbicides.

Worse, some very narrow beds are stuffed with regular landscape plants, few of which are adapted to tight spaces surrounded by pavement, a setting which horticulturists call "hell strips." And most initial plantings peter out quickly.

Truth is, while it's easy enough for designers to draw little circles onto paper plans and assign plant



Hell strip Lantana

names to them, in real life it's sheer misery for plants. The shallow dirt is usually hard-packed clay with no

aeration for roots, which stays wet all winter and causes root rot. And often the only summer moisture

is from occasional rains or plants can survive these conditions.

Plus, sight restrictions dictate small shrubs, grasses, evergreen groundcovers, and flowers that generally need to stay under two or maybe three feet tall and not very wide lest they sprawl into foot or vehicular traffic. They have to tolerate or recover quickly from being stumbled over or being run over with cars, and look good most if not all year without needing a lot of pruning or tidying. And thrive in sun or shade, and not have thorns. And not be poisonous to passing pets. And not accumulate litter (good luck with that).

Throw in how pavement absorbs solar energy that in Mississippi's summers can easily heat it to 160 degrees and radiate well into the night, so we end up with soil that dries out quickly and plants get baked to death.

The closest I can come to these conditions is from decades of growing plants in a coffee table size box in the back of my pickup truck.

Through trial and error I've found plants that can tolerate temperatures ranging from hard freezes to over a hundred degrees and survive on only rainfall while I live overseas for months on end.

The most durable include dwarf yaupon hollies, soft-tip yucca, various dwarf Nandinas, thornless prickly pear cactus, groundcover sedum, stubby-foliaged white iris, rosemary, variegated Liriope, some small ornamental grasses, and compact soft-leaf yucca (*Y. recurvifolia*). Add seasonal color from lantana, dwarf Tete a Tete daffodils, silvery gray artemisia, oregano, clover, Stella d'Oro daylily, and heat- or cold-hardy annuals. Even wildflowers are better than dead plants!

I'm hoping that combining a few of these street-side toughies with cobblestones may do the trick without much upkeep. We'll see.

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