



HOME | HELLSTRIP PLANTING

Hellstrip Planting

Whether you call it a hellstrip, parking strip, verge, or tree belt, the area between the sidewalk and the street can be a gardening challenge or opportunity.

 ARTICLES | UPDATED: JANUARY 29, 2021



Photo credit: Holly Thorpe

Many of us who live in the country or small towns are fortunate to have large amounts of green space to plant small gardens or flower beds. But in cities where plots of land are tiny, those choices are limited. Now, people are looking at every available space to plant.

An area of land that has recently come into consideration as a place to plant is the space between the sidewalk and the street curb.

This is often called the median, boulevard, planting strip, or hellstrip. Hellstrips are great areas for plants that attract pollinators.

When you are planning new plantings, there are many things to consider. A hellstrip may be subject to additional considerations. This area is usually part of the public right-of-way and subject to ordinances. You should contact your municipal office to see if there are any restrictions on plantings. These rules often deal with safety and visibility. Underground utilities or overhead wires may impose restrictions that must be part of the planning process. Homeowners' associations often require bylaw checks and approvals.

After permissions have been granted, it is time to start planning. Here's a list of things to consider.

Many of these apply to any garden that is being planted.

Condition of soil—nutrients

This area has probably been planted with grass for many years. There may be trees present. It may be overrun by weeds. To truly know what is going on with your soil, you need to start with a soil fertility test. Soil tests are available through Penn State Extension. You receive results of the test and fertility recommendations for the types of plants you want to put in that area. If the soil test indicates that nutrients are lacking, follow their recommendations. Lasagna gardening is a method to help build up the soil. For details refer to this article on [sheet composting and sheet mulching](#) .

Texture of soil

The texture of the soil is important because it shows how easily the soil can be worked, the amount of water and air it can hold, and how water moves through it. Clay soil does not allow water to pass through easily and plants have a harder time establishing their root systems. Add compost to these soils. Texture ultimately gives you an indication of the soil drainage of this area. For instructions on how to test your soil texture, refer to the [jar soil test activity sheet](#).

Sunlight availability

Plants have daily requirements for sun. Full sun is six or more hours of direct sunlight per day. Partial sun is four to six hours per day. Partial shade is two to four hours per day. Shade is less than two hours of sunlight per day. Observe the area throughout the day to determine the amount of sun and shade it receives. Choose plants that match what your area provides.

Water

It is important that you can easily and safely water the area. You should observe if water is pooling in the area during heavy rainstorms. If the area is downward sloping toward the road, you may need to consider plants that are hardy and drought-resistant.

Snow

If snow is piled onto this area during the winter, the plants you select must be salt tolerant because of the road salt content of the snow. You should also keep in mind that perennials are ideal because they are not damaged by snow pressure.

Now that you have gathered the necessary information, consider your options. Trees and shrubs may not be a good fit due to their large size. Make sure you know the plant's mature height. Select trees or shrubs that are native to the region. When height is a concern, consider shorter cultivars of native species. For example, winterberry *Ilex verticillata* 'Little Goblin Red' grows only 3 to 4 feet tall.

In general, the best choices for these areas will be annuals and perennials. Some of the popular full sun perennials are lavender, coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), lily, daisy, or clematis. Partial shade perennial choices could include turtlehead (*Chelone* spp.), astilbe, or anemone. Hosta, hellebore, lily of the valley, and bleeding heart are popular full shade perennials. Annuals that require full sun conditions include geraniums, zinnias, *Rudbeckia*, verbena, or marigold. Partial shade choices include alyssum, pansy, and lobelia. Many of these choices support pollinators. For a comprehensive list of pollinator plants, you can go to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center database. Create depth by planting shorter plants on the edges of this space and taller plants towards the middle.

Growing vegetables may be an option. Tomatoes, peppers, and Swiss chard are popular choices. Keep in mind that these plants need a more nutrient-rich soil than native plants. Also, it is best to avoid planting root crops in this area.

When all the work is done, stand back and appreciate the beauty of this hellstrip. It has turned into a beautiful area that neighbors and travelers can admire. Know that you reap other benefits from your efforts. Planting these areas helps filter and absorb rainwater, supports pollinators, increases property value, and adds wildlife habitat. With a little watering and weeding, this area will be enjoyed for many years to come.