

Goodbye to All That!

This spring has been the best of times: everything is so gloriously green! This spring has been the worst of times: not only have weeds magnified, but perennials have escaped their bonds and strangled their neighbors. It is time to redefine 'garden'.

Three weeks ago I was privileged to wander about in a garden that was perfect for a retiree, and a greatly needed lesson for this post-retiree. In the large shaded area behind the house the azaleas were past their peak bloom but putting out healthy new foliage. Grass grew happily in sunlit areas but it was not missed a bit in the places where shade made the fight for a traditional grass lawn a losing battle.

What grew green in this non-lawn were several species of tiny ground covers, known among fussy gardeners as weeds. Like an old Persian carpet they made a suitable rug under the trees. The property was graced with flowering trees and shrubs that would follow the azaleas in their turn, but the bright annuals and perennials were in containers on the deck where their colors would clamor for the care they needed.

Of course there had been a tremendous amount of plain hard work over the years to bring this garden to its prime, but the kinds of intelligent decisions made about borders, paths, edgings, and the placement of plants were the kinds of solutions that meant that once done, the beds did not have to suffer total upheaval to correct the death of a plant or a change of mind.

It will be difficult for me to say goodbye to the invited and uninvited plants that delight me with their vivid colors but keeping beds of perennials cared for means the continual weeding around each stem to protect it from the wretched tentacles of honeysuckle, trumpet vine and other scamps that were here when I came. Some will stay – the coreopsis and rudbeckias may continue to shoulder each other out while they cover the soil around the birdbath. However it is past time to admit that 'less' and 'enough' are also a part of the gardening lexicon.

Gardeners are always reluctant to cut back, hating to admit there can be an end to DIY projects. Unfortunately even when the spirit is willing, occasionally other body parts scream in protest, a signal that it is time to simplify spaces to where a mower or trimmer can handle more chores.

'Less' does not translate to 'nothing but evergreens'! In fact, I have a brick planter that once held miniature evergreens that finally overwhelmed the space: it can be filled with daylilies, perhaps an iris or two since many of those have stopped blooming, their sites having become crowded and too shady.

If you can't imagine being without roses, there are some that really are carefree. Rugosa roses are handsome, healthy, require little care, smell heavenly and tolerate a seaside site as well as neglect. They are shrubs so do need space. The series of smaller shrub roses that began with 'Knock Out' are sturdy and reliable even if not a plant you'd want to take to the prom. In case you have a shed you want to disguise, there is 'Darlow's Enigma'. Clusters of small white flowers follow in waves from April through September. If you have an eyesore larger than a shed, there is *R. banksi lutea*, the Lady Banks spring-blooming small yellow rose capable of covering city blocks.

If you need a rose as barrier, try 'Mermaid' with large open-faced yellow blooms with deep red stamens. It may be fragrant but its prickles are of such size and strength, I keep a discreet distance. Zepherine Drouhin has absolutely NO prickles and its spring blooms are a deep pink blessed with a fragrance that is the essence of 'rosedom'. Only intermittent blooms follow spring and it has to be trained to an arbor or fence.

The choice of camellias to provide color from late fall through spring requires some planning as they become small trees in our area although a few of these beautifully shaped evergreens would be quite landscape enough for many gardens. Easy-care spireas are happy campers in our area although they will probably be a foot taller and wider than the dimensions given in the catalog. Spirea spring and summer blooms are in white and shades of pink to deep red. Their fine foliage is semi-evergreen and a pleasing contrast to large-leaved evergreens.

Foliage itself offers so many contrasting shades of greens and golds and touches of burgundy, you may find that even without an array of annuals and perennials such a garden is never without color. And of course, if you do find you have a spot needing a bright splash, plant more bulbs!

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