

The Myth of No Maintenance

Actually some people do have charming no-maintenance landscapes by virtue of having the upkeep kept up by another person – an enviable situation. Truly most of us are stuck with high maintenance gardens because we find plants irresistible. We tend to overestimate our budgets, our time, and our stamina and end up loving every unkempt inch of it but promising ourselves that we will reform!

A no-maintenance landscape may not be possible but a low maintenance one is not only possible but can be rich in variety and beauty. This reformation can be a gradual process as plants die, or just need to be dug out and replanted someplace else. The choices we make from now on will result in a truly low maintenance garden.

Trees are the place to start. The storms of the past few years have removed hundreds of trees from our local properties and many of these gaps remain. You may choose a deciduous tree for the south of your house because you want the shade it provides in summer. It also lowers the costs of air conditioning considerably. In winter the sun streams through its bare branches into your home, warming it.

The down side of trees that shed their leaves is that most of us think raking them up and disposing of them is a part of good citizenship. If you plant a tree with palm-size leaves, those leaves will not instantly decompose but if you plant an elegant willow oak for example, you can ignore their slender leaves as they drift away. Large leaves can also be ignored if they fall on mulched areas or blow under the shrubbery. It is only on lawns that wet matted leaves are a menace. If you have wood decking or a porch, you can't let blown debris breed trouble. Such stuff has to be swept away.

Therefore for low maintenance you really must shrink the size of the lawn. If you desire an area carpet of emerald grass, plant evergreens near it as a fringe. The dark green yews and hollies add stability to a planting and do not need pruning if you give them the space their ultimate size requires. Evergreens make a splendid windbreak if planted at a distance about equal to the height of the house. It may have been an old wives tale but I remember hearing that if the windbreak was too distant the wind swooped down again with even more force between the trees and the house.

You know of course to plant dwarf species under the dining room windows. We have all experienced the 'dwarf' that stretched to six feet. What we failed to realize was that the normal size of that species was a majestic 80 feet so indeed we did have a dwarf. Everything IS relative.

Rhododendrons and azaleas are most beautiful planted amid tall pines. If space permits, that combination needs no other enhancement. If the area is well mulched you won't have weeds and eventually you will have pine needles to gather for other uses. This miniature woodland requires little care aside from feeding and watering until the shrubs are established.

Slow-growing plants are easy to live with. That is why boxwood is so beloved: you have years to decide where you really want to put it. If you plant a boxwood hedge, a few years later you can lengthen it by moving every other plant.

Pruning is a fine hobby, perhaps even an art form. Some gardeners with loppers in hand have created globes, trapezoids, squares, and rectangles giving a formal dignity to their property. Other gardeners study the forms of the natural plant, whether conical or spreading, weeping or erect, and play the forms against one another in their planning as well as choosing differing colors and shades for rhythm.

To make the garden easy to care for the planning has to be done over more than one season so you know your soil and the diverse microclimates in your world. Easier said than done as we all want it finished immediately if not sooner. Does gardening teach patience?

Perennial beds are less work if you segregate the species by cultural requirements. Cluster those that love shade, or sun, damp, or dry so you are not trying to satisfy divergent needs in any one area. In addition, plant enough of one species so that you attract pollinators. Butterflies and other wee things can't find a specific plant in a motley crowd.

A lot of time is spent by most of us in moving plants that have stopped blooming. They were planted in a sunny spot but are now in shade cast by burgeoning neighbors. So it is either move the iris or cut down the vitex? Gardening is so existential – a process of work and learning, brief disappointments, small joys.