

BIG DECISIONS: CHANGE YOUR GARDEN TO FIT YOUR NEEDS

Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener

Now that it's July, deciduous trees and shrubs have dropped their spring show and donned their summer leaves, helping to create an oasis of green and a blaze of color around our homes, despite the soaring temperatures. Along with those trees, flowers, shrubs, and other plants, have come the birds, bees, butterflies, and other pollinators, providing our own "Animal Planet" show.

Numerous health experts agree that gardening is not only a place of peace and mental calm, but is physically healthy for us, helping us remain mobile and flexible for much later in our lives than we might otherwise be. WebMD.com points out that gardening promotes your body's endurance, flexibility, and strength. On WebMD.com, author Jeff Restuccio says to alternate the gardening activities—light and heavy chores—over a 30- to 60-minute span, then rest a while. Yardshare.com also notes that gardening improves "our endurance and strength...reduces stress and promotes relaxation...provides a sense of a job well done..." I would add to that to drink plenty of water, and when temperatures are in the nineties, do gardening work in short bursts of a half-hour or so, and then go back inside to cool off.

Sometimes, those gardening chores of weeding, trimming, pruning, and other chores seem never-ending, especially for many of us senior citizens, when our mobility and flexibility are not what we'd like. For me at least, these days it's hard to kneel down and even harder to get up from my little bench; gardening chores take a lot longer now than when I was in my thirties; and allergies and heat intolerances are having their way with me. Even so, I'm not ready to give up the garden yet. Thus, the Old Coach and I have begun to adapt our gardens to our abilities, gradually making the gardens fewer (we used to have more than 25 garden areas on our half-acre), smaller, more narrow, or eliminating them altogether. Perennials and shrubs have almost completely replaced annuals.

One of the things I love about a garden is that it is ever-changing—plants die or grow too big for their spot, once-small trees and shrubs loom over sun-loving plants. And those changes give you an opportunity to make your gardens a little easier to manage as other aspects of your life get busy—jobs, kids—you know the drill.

And perhaps that ever-changing garden also means lots of fantasies as you sit on the deck, sipping your tea or wine and contemplating those changes. What should replace the dead plant? Should you just stop planting annuals in front of that row of shrubs? Where should you move that too-big Pampas grass? Is the spiderwort turning into a thug and should you dig it up? Should you change out the sun-loving plants for shade-loving ones under that big tree, or should you cut down the tree? Or should you totally eliminate that garden area?

If you're cutting back on garden beds, should you place raised beds or containers for vegetables or flowers on a patio, deck, or porch for easier access? Would weaving irrigation hoses through the garden or installing a water-conservation system help ease your work in the garden?

Whatever decisions you do make, things you change or eliminate, please, please don't make mulch "volcanoes" around the tree trunks—the mulch piled high around trunks with sides sloping down the trunks. Those volcanoes prevent rain water from soaking into the roots and are an open invitation to damaging insects and diseases to invade your trees. Instead, pile the mulch in the opposite direction: keep the mulch a couple inches away from the tree trunk; spread it evenly out to the dripline of the branches, then mound a ring of mulch along the outer edge, which helps to keep water in the root area, where it needs to be.

You can get advice for many of your gardening chores and plans by coming to one of our free Saturday morning seminars at the University of Maryland Extension Building, 330 Montevue Lane, Frederick. Check our website for a list of upcoming seminars and register early—seminars fill up fast. Then settle back in your garden with that cuppa and just enjoy the peace.

For more information, go to <<http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening>> or call us at 301-600-1596.



A sunny bed at the front of the house used to showcase annuals and required a lot of spring planting and all-summer weeding. Now this "English cottage garden" is filled with perennials against a backdrop of Browni Hicks yews: Russian sage, cone flowers, bee balm, coreopsis, chrysanthemums, lamb's ear, and day lilies, as well as a number of spring-flowering bulbs (now dormant). Photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau.



This sidewalk garden strip has been narrowed by at least half, as you can see by the bare dirt that is soon to be filled with grass. Although only a few hostas show in this picture, the narrowed garden strip is filled with shady perennials and plants that generally bloom before the deciduous tree leaves out—several kinds of hostas, columbine, irises, lavender, and poppies. Photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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