Low Maintenance Gardening

by JOAN KOBETZ

I don't have a lot of time for gardening. Short of hiring a landscape crew, is there a way to have a nice garden with less work?

Few of us have as much time to spend in the garden as we might wish. But there are ways to maximize your time spent to achieve a lush garden.

Have a plan. By starting your landscaping with a plan, you will have an idea of the types of plants you need to buy and where you're going to plant them. You would also eliminate having to rip out or move them to put in another feature, such as a swimming pool, shed, or patio. When planning your landscape, it will help to cluster your plants together in large beds, leaving them room to grow. Create a pleasing shape for the beds, making the curves easy for your mower to navigate. Annuals are labor intensive. An informal design using a varied selection of perennials and trees and shrubs in their natural shape will provide multiple seasons of interest for little effort.

Select the right plants. All plants are genetically programmed to grow in special environments and to a certain size. Their nursery tags usually provide this information. By giving them the room they need to grow, you will reduce pruning needs. Sun lovers in the shade or shady characters in the sun will be stressed and more susceptible to diseases, drought, and pests, invariably causing more labor to keep them healthy.

Get to know the natives. The native plants are the ones that thrive in this area and should do well in your garden with little intervention. In addition, many of them provide food sources for birds and wildlife and many beneficial insects.

Work with Nature. Leave the grass clippings on the lawn to decompose into grass food. Let the fall leaves create a natural mulch in your gardens. They will decompose into organic matter that will enrich your soil and provide food for beneficial organisms. Many birds and insects feed on other insect pests and reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides. Creating an environment that provides food, water and shelter for wildlife will encourage them to visit your yard.

Lawn = work. The idealized lawn is a monoculture of a plant species not well-designed for our locality. Our summers get too hot for the cool-season grasses, like tall fescue, and our winters are too cold for the warm season grasses. As a result, the grasses go dormant during these difficult periods and turn brown. Keeping it green in summer stresses the grass, causing it to put energy into leaf growth instead of good root structure, making it more attractive to pests and diseases. Watering and fertilizing it compounds the problem and requires more frequent mowing. By reducing the lawn area, one can cut the time spent mowing, and by allowing the grass use its natural defense of dormancy in the heat of summer, the lawn will rebound in the cooler months with better health.

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No Fruits and Veggies. Most fruit trees, berries and vegetables grown for human consumption have been hybridized for greater crop production and have lost much of their natural resistance to diseases and pests. This causes more work to grow them. However, if you simply must plant food crops, select varieties that are disease resistant and require little staking. Mulch and soil amended with organic matter will greatly improve the health and production of the vegetable garden.

Herbs, on the other hand, fall in the no-brainer category. Most are drought resistant, tolerant of poor soil and ignored by pests.

Make your tools work harder than you. Good quality garden tools require less effort to operate. Make sure they're sized properly for your body and strength. Shovels, pruners and saws should be sharpened for easier cutting. Soaker hoses can be arranged to water large beds with little effort or evaporation. Lawn mowers with electric starters are easier to start than pull cords.

Mulch. An organic mulch conserves moisture, reduces weed germination, and improves the soil as it decomposes. Spread it no more than 3" deep. It does not need to be removed annually, just increased as necessary for depth and aesthetics.

Relax. Strict enforcement of a "no-weed" policy or rigid geometric shapes consumes many hours better spent enjoying your landscape. Not all "weeds" are undesirable, some are just misunderstood. Appreciating the natural shapes of your trees and shrubs will eliminate the desire to whack them into tortured configurations.

Knowledge is power. Just as nearly every kitchen has a cookbook, every home with a yard should have a basic gardening book. Knowing your plants and some basic maintenance procedures will enable you to better understand their needs.

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Spends more time enjoying her garden in Buckeystown than actually working in it.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.