THINGS WE CAN LEARN FROM OLD GARDENS

by Joan Kobetz
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The suburban garden has changed dramatically from what it was a hundred years ago. While we have many new, powerful, laborsaving gadgets, the over-all design has declined. Three inventions of the last century have had the most impact on the changes in garden design: power mowers, air-conditioning and television.

A hundred years ago, it was too hot to sit inside in summer, mowing a lawn with a reel mower was a laborious affair and entertainment was provided by visiting with your neighbors and friends. The garden was the "great room" of the early 1900's. As such, much more attention was given to making it hospitable, and often a showcase of one's talents, taste and wealth. There was usually a paved area with comfortable furniture for sitting. This was always shaded, by large trees or man-made structures. There were walkways leading from one area to another, because "strolling in the garden" was a common evening activity. The garden had shrub and flower borders so that there would be something interesting to admire when strolling. Breaking up the garden into "rooms", so that it wasn't all visible from one vantage point made it imperative to stroll to see everything. It was an interesting place to be.

Compare that with today's suburban back yard: a third acre of lawn, no shade, nothing of interest to see, no secrets to reveal and no incentive to spend time there. It's no wonder that gardening is often considered a chore. We can recycle a lot of ideas from gardens of the past to make our gardens of the future a better place to be.

Large shade trees are the place to start. If you are not already blessed with them, then it's high time to plant one or some, depending on your lot size. They will provide welcome shade for you, your air-conditioning bills, your lawn, and many of nature's creatures looking for homes in their ever-shrinking habitat. Aesthetically, they will also provide a "roof" in the garden and help to bring your house into scale with the surrounding landscape. The gardens of old made use of a lot of native trees and shrubs, because they were available, but they have also survived with little human intervention. If you're looking for durable, low maintenance landscaping, natives are the way to go.

Mixed borders of shrubs will provide year-round interest in the garden, reduce the amount of lawn to mow and often provide food for interesting birds and insects. Even a hedge of a single species is more interesting than a picket fence and will require little maintenance if one is not too picky about symmetry. There are limitless possibilities to suit any personality. Mixing perennial flowers into the borders will provide even more interest with little effort.

EQUAL ACCESS PROGRAMS
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Our great-grandparents did not have the herbicides and pesticides that now line the shelves in the garden centers. They relied on ornamental ground covers to keep weeds out of the garden, and either hand dug or ignored the weeds in their lawn. A return to these methods would reduce the amount of toxins in our environment. All insects (except perhaps Japanese beetles) play a valuable role in the environment. Applying broad-spectrum insecticides upsets the balance of nature and reduces the ability of the landscape to heal itself.

The materials used for patios, paths and walls were often found in nearby quarries or brickyards. As such, they looked natural and blended with the surrounding landscape. This reduced the cost and environmental impact of transporting them great distances across the country. Very often, the materials were recycled from another project that was being torn down.

The yards and gardens worked harder than they do now. Homeowners often had a vegetable patch, berry bush, fruit tree and or arbor covered with vines. Clotheslines were the only way to dry laundry, and are still a great way to reduce utility costs. Some homeowners were able to keep small animals in suburban lots for food and as their acreage grew, so did the size and quantity of their flocks. Horses and sheep were excellent “lawn mowers”. Yard debris was piled in an obscure corner and left to decompose into compost. Rain barrels and cisterns were used to capture water.

Power mowers have contributed to the increase in size and importance of the lawn in our landscaping. Lawns were, by necessity, a minor ornament in the yards of the early 1900’s, not the entire landscape we see too often today. Few of us are fielding a team of baseball or soccer players in our backyards, so having a lawn the size of a playing field is not necessary. By increasing the size of our borders, we can reduce the size of the lawn, the size of our mowers and the time spent mowing the lawn. Gas-powered mowers are extremely inefficient and increase in environmental and noise pollution, as they get larger and more powerful. Most homeowners would not be physically harmed by a weekly hour or so spent walking behind a smaller mower.

So, the next time you see an old garden, take the time to admire the ingenuity of its creators. Enjoy the pleasant space and take note of ideas that can be incorporated into your own garden. Look for interesting plants, structures, ornaments, textures and smells. Listen for water features, rustling leaves and bird song. These are not impossible ideas for the twenty-first century. We can put our modern tools and information to work for us to build a more pleasant place to live.

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.