

Lazy Gardener

By Bobbi Gustafson



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Not much time? Bad back? Tight budget? Following these tips will have your neighbors wondering if you're a lazy gardener—or just plain smart.

Gardening doesn't have to consume every weekend, or simultaneously strain your back and pocketbook. If you want to get into gardening, but feel like you don't have the time or energy you think you'll need to be successful, read on. These tips will help you enjoy the flowers and veggies you love with minimal effort.

Get started

Got lawn in a sunny spot? Then you can have a garden—and you don't have to spend backbreaking hours cutting out and hauling off sod. Use the principles of composting to prepare a garden space for next spring. Just follow these steps:

1. Cut the grass, leaving the clippings right on the lawn.
2. Water the area thoroughly, then cover it with layers of shredded paper (no junk mail), newspaper (no glossy stuff), cardboard (pull off tape and mailing labels), dry leaves, and pine needles. These are sources of carbon. The grass and its roots are sources of nitrogen.
3. Add a layer of bagged or homemade compost, if you can; it will inoculate your area with micro-organisms to start the process of decomposition. You don't have to dig it in; worms will do the work for you.
4. Soak the area again with water and cover it with black plastic. Poke a few air holes in the plastic.
5. Let everything sit undisturbed for four to six months. If you can't stomach the look of black plastic, throw some bark over it for the time being. While you read your seed catalogs during the winter, worms will aerate and add nitrogen to the layers of materials as they break down.
6. Next spring—say, April—you can remove the bark, peel back the plastic, and plant seeds or seedlings directly into what you find beneath it.



This bed was overrun with *Melissa*, a noxious, invasive weed. The bed has been cut down, flattened, and covered with shredded paper (a carbon source). It was then watered and covered with the black plastic seen here. It can be uncovered during rains a few times this year, then recovered. By late spring 2009, after using less effort and incorporating nutrients that are already there, the bed will boast rich, dark soil, full of life.

Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.

You also can use a variation on this system to get rid of unwanted or invasive plants. Simply cut the undesirable plant at ground level, cover the area with black plastic, then cover the plastic with wood chips. This is a good, less-strenuous way to control overgrown parts of your yard with minimal effort.

Leaving the plastic and wood chips in place for two to three years should smother most unwanted plants; after that period, you can remove the plastic and wood chips from a portion of the area and see if your attempts to corral the unwanted plant have been successful.

Save time

Once you have your garden space up and running, these tips will help you save time from start to finish:

- You'll work faster if you sharpen your pruners, shovels and hoes, and make sure the handles are the right size for you.
- Plant your favorite flowers, veggies or herbs near your kitchen door, so they can be harvested quickly. For example, if you love onions, plant pots of them a few weeks apart and near the door, so you can enjoy them whenever you want—and all summer long.
- Don't have time to chase moles or set traps? Stuff mint leaves in their holes and watch them run.
- To save time, start with easy plants to grow in Skagit County. Try *Erysimum Bowles Mauve*, *Penstemon*, Cape fuchsia, snapdragon, geranium and zinnia. Just dress these with compost a couple times each season and deadhead them (pull off dead flowers) for endless blooms. Russian sage, crocosmia and asters are great for late summer. *Allysum* and *bacopa* are easy, too, and feed predator insects all summer long.



Got leftover vegetable or fruit garbage? Before planting, Skagit County Master Gardener Bobbi Gustafson chops vegetable matter into the soil to bring the earthworms in. She covers the material with soil, tops it with an inch of compost, and waters it in. Next, she adds her plants. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.



Common earthworms aerate and add nitrogen to your soil. If you choose to create a garden plot using the "layering" method described in this article, worms will find their way to those materials and consumed them as they break down, leaving nitrogen-rich worm waste ("castings") behind. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.

Save your back (and knees)

- Hate getting down on your knees to weed? Get after them early in the season and hoe them when they are small. Then mulch well to suppress any weed seeds that haven't germinated yet. Some weed flowers are important for beneficial insects; just cut the flowers off mature weeds before they seed.
- Use ground covers to crowd out weeds so you don't have to bend over 10,000 times. Ground covers also keep in moisture, protect and feed beneficial insects, and prevent erosion. Good choices for Skagit County include creeping Jenny, lambs ear, Ajuga, wild strawberries, most sedums, less-invasive ivy varieties, or ivy alternatives such as native kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) for sunny sites, or crinkle-leaf creeper (*Rubus pentalobus*) for partially shaded slopes. Just steer clear of English ivy.

Save money

- Want to save money on treatments for plant diseases—whether organic or chemical-based? Spray, wipe, or dip your pruners with ethanol or isopropyl alcohol, or Lysol disinfectant, to sterilize them and prevent disease from traveling plant to plant as you prune.
- You can also save money on plant-disease treatments by creating environments that discourage diseases from developing. For example, thinning shrubs to increase air flow will help prevent disease, as will trimming leaves from the bottom 14-16 inches of roses to deter splash-up that fosters black spot. You might even try planting a groundcover beneath your roses, too.
- Don't want to pay for spinach or other greens? If you see lambsquarters while you are weeding, cut off the top 4 inches and sauté. Add a little salt and pepper, a drop of butter, and wine vinegar for a tasty departure from spinach.
- Save on your water bill by adding mulch around your plants. Mulch can be almost any organic material you can get, from wood chips to bark, and from grass clippings to compost. Mulch reduces your need to water by slowing evaporation.
- Save money on slug bait by placing a plastic or glass pot with some dirt and dead foliage in it under susceptible plants. Slugs will gather under it each night; you can then remove them each morning.
- Save money on pesticides by encouraging beneficial insects to set up shop in your garden. For example, letting some of your lettuces set flowers will lay out a welcome mat for predatory soldier beetles and their larvae, which love them.



Transforming a weedy bed, part 1: Spread newsprint to block weeds and provide carbon.

Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.



Next, part 2: Cover the newsprint with bark, or lay down some nitrogen-rich material, such as the grass clippings shown here. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.



The following spring, part 3: Plant whatever you like in the bed, from seeds to seedlings, vegetables or flowers.

Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.

Whether your little piece of heaven is a formal garden or a backyard habitat, these tips should help you enjoy it without emptying your wallet, breaking your back, or spending your children's inheritance.



One result of Gustafson's "buried vegetable matter" approach: beautiful geraniums. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.