

## LOW CARE GARDENING

Are you a homeowner that has walked out of your home recently and taken a look at your lawn and wished that you didn't have to spend so much time watering, fertilizing, weeding and then mowing it? If so consider replacing some of it with a low-care garden that can be more visually satisfying than a manicured lawn.

Low-care gardening doesn't mean neglecting the garden or cutting corners. In fact, it often demands more thought and planning, especially at first, than you or the house builder put into your current yard, assuming that all that was done originally was to buy a few flowers and a half dozen shrubs, before pre-grown turf was rolled out. The aim of low-care gardening is not to scrimp on maintenance, but instead to choose low-care plants at the onset and to place them in such a way that they are the key factors in the garden

Preplan the planting areas that you desire to change and on paper sketch out a master plan of what you want your yard to look like. The easiest part to determine is the desired shape of the bed or beds, but that isn't the crucial factor in a low-maintenance garden. The actual plants and their special needs are!

Start with a soil analysis. The acidity, or the pH, of your soil is very important to know before you select and buy any new plants, for you'll want to group plants in each bed according to their special growing requirements. Check the soil with one of the newer pH meters, which have been designed for a homeowner to use are now fairly reliable and inexpensive, or have it professionally tested. Many inexperienced gardeners are tempted to skip the soil analysis part but, one the biggest mistakes a person can make in designing an easy care garden is to innocently insert a plant that grows best in a neutral environment into an acidic bed.

All plants have different growing requirements, so look up each of the plants that you are considering in a garden book and check first of all if the plant will easily survive in our climate or zone. Other crucial factors to consider for every plant is whether it needs full exposure to the sun, partial sun, or full shade for it to grow well;. whether it grows best in a sandy, loam or clay type soil; and if it will require more or less water than the other plants in the same bed. Make sure the plants you choose don't have any special maintenance needs, such as training, staking, pruning, or frequent replanting. Is it easily established but not invasive? And does it resist common pests and diseases so that you won't need to constantly spray it?

Plants are the healthiest and demand the least maintenance when they are grown in conditions hospitable to them, so plan and choose well. Another caution to consider in the planning stages is the cost of the plant and whether or not it can be bought locally.

Don't attempt to tackle the whole yard at one time. Take it in easy steps and actually start out first by renovating only one bed. To get rid of the existing sod, you can rent a machine or remove it by hand using a knife or a sharp flat nosed spade. Next roll up the sod and give it away or compost it. Then start preparing the site by amending it according to the pH readings you took, matching it to the needs of the new plants you've chosen.

Another mistake often made by an inexperienced gardener is placing their main foundation plants too close together or too near a fence or a structure. Garden books and even the plant labels will indicate how large the perennial plant, grass, shrub, or tree will

grow. Pay attention to it; otherwise you'll end up in a few years with an over grown bed, and you'll have to either prune the plants or move them farther apart. That is labor intensive, something you were trying to avoid. Plants may also subsequently die because of being uprooted several times and it will spoil the look you were attempting to create. Another hint: plants will always attempt to grow to their inherent height and width characteristics even after being pruned. The best time to avoid this mistake is in the planning stages when you were putting everything on paper. You can always fill in the gaps with annuals, ground covers, or chips until the permanent plants grow a bit.

Purchase only high quality seedlings and plants. When purchasing trees and shrubs, large plants are not necessarily the best buy. Most of them have been grown plantation style and are dug up and then put in containers. Not all growers are careful in digging up the plant and may have left the major portion of the root ball in the ground. The tree looks wonderful when purchased, but it may take several years for it to re-grow its root structure. A smaller plant may have a higher proportion of its root structure remaining and therefore suffer less from shock during transplanting and resume normal growth much sooner.

So finish the first bed, water it, enjoy the beauty of your labors for a few days while letting your back have a little rest and then begin tackling the rest of your lawn and yard. And remember, you're doing this so that more rust accumulates on your lawn mower between mowings.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.