

# Rejuvenating Your Garden: Part II

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## Give your garden a fresher look

After thinking it over for quite a while and drawing up some plans, you have decided you really want to rejuvenate your garden to have a fresher, younger look. Or maybe you have recently purchased this house with a neglected garden, or you just do not care for the way it looks.

So, it is time to plunge in and take some action. What to do first? Take several “before” pictures, and then check the zoning and building codes, and call 811 to mark the utility lines. Develop your budget with some built-in leeway for an unexpected hurdle or two. Decide what you will be able to do yourself, and what you will hire a professional to do. You are going to allow 3 years to complete it.

Consider which jobs would be better done in the summer and which would be better done in the winter to make the most of the time available. You do not want to be walking repeatedly or running heavy machinery over soaking wet soils. Concrete work needs mild weather. You may have more time in the winter for a construction project, but it might be more pleasant to do it in summer.

Look at the condition of fences, walls, steps, sidewalks, paths, paving, and sheds. Are they beginning to rot or crumble, or are they in good order? Repairing or replacing these can be messy and expensive, so plan ahead.

Early on, remove big trees or shrubs that have outlived their usefulness or outgrown their space. Just because it is in your yard does not mean you have to keep it forever. Besides, old trees can be dangerous. Whatever you decide, do not top trees! (For many trees, a major wound at the top of the main stem is the beginning of the end.) Have a professional cut the tree up high enough from the ground so that after you have severed the roots there will be plenty of weight to push the stump over. Many deciduous trees such as willows and fruit trees will continue to send up suckers unless you get rid of the stump. Or you can have the stump ground out. Oftentimes, selective pruning is all you will need to do. Major pruning is best done during the winter dormant season, and planting is done in the fall just as the rains begin.

Neglected yards usually have a serious weed problem. Weeds are easiest to pull when they are young. If you want to use an herbicide, do so when leaves are present, so you can see where to spray them during their growing season. If it is winter, you will have to dig them out. Perennial weeds may take several seasons to get under control, even with an herbicide. Unfortunately, weed seeds can lie dormant for many years.



This patio provides privacy and adequate seating for guests. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Himalayan blackberries have a tremendous root system that stores a lot of energy or “food.” Cut the canes to the ground in August, paint an herbicide on the exposed stem, and then cover the whole area with 8-12 inches of arborist chips. (If you have cut down some trees and shrubs, they can be ground and saved for this purpose.)

Lay down the outline of any new hardscaping, paths, raised beds, patio, borders, structures, or other features. Walk around and study them for several days. Do things flow smoothly? Does the garden serve the purposes you want it to? Does it fit your priorities? Are the paths wide enough? Does it provide privacy? Is the patio big enough to seat guests? A garden must be functional and practical first; decorating comes later.

But do not let the gradual approach be the road to indecision. Make this the garden you want, not the one you have become accustomed to. Better to take out the overgrown tree at the start than removing it later, causing damage to areas you have already redone. Once you made the decision, be ruthless with the saw.

A case for lawns. Open spaces are a relief for the busier parts of a garden. They provide a counterpoint to the busyness of the planting beds and offer a pleasant place to walk and view the garden. Better a calm, open space than dreary, unloved borders you do not have time to properly maintain. It is nice to have a place for children or grandchildren to play—think handsprings, tea parties, wrestling, and tag.

Once the hardscaping is in, begin plant selection. First, will it grow here? There are several climate types in Skagit County as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Hardiness Zones. For the most part, Skagit County is in Zone 8A, but as you move closer to the mountains, the zone can change to 6A or 6B. When the temperature becomes colder than 15 degrees Fahrenheit, and wind picks up, you could be facing “zone denial.”

What kind of soil and drainage does your garden provide? How much sunlight or shade does the plant need to thrive? Can it take our dry summers? Does it provide several seasons of interest? How much maintenance will it need? How big will it eventually get? The answer to that is somewhere between 50-100% more than the plant tags says.



The variety of trees and bushes give a pleasant shade for your patio. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Trees and shrubs are best planted in early fall when the rains have started so they have a chance to start growing new roots before winter. Perennials are best planted in spring.

For all plants dig a hole 3 times the width of the root ball and only as deep as the root ball or a bit less. For trees and most shrubs, you can wash away the planting medium from around the roots and cut off any damaged or circling roots. Place the plant on top of a mound of soil in the hole and backfill with only the soil you took out of the hole. Don't add any amendments to the hole. Water well and spread a 2-inch layer of arborist chips mulch. Water regularly the first year at least, even if it is a drought tolerant species. Do not cut back any of the canopy. Plants need all of their leaves in order to grow new roots and get established.

So, whether you have grand plans to completely redo your garden or simply build on the past with improvements to meet your needs, take time to enjoy the role of the gardener in creating a place you love.

## **RESOURCES:**

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