

Managing an Overgrown Garden

By Kathy Wolfe
December 3, 2021



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Gardeners are generally creative and nurturing individuals. We carefully select our seeds, bulbs, shrubs and trees, find the best spot to ensure their growing success, and water, fertilize and encourage their growth. As we add more plant material, we work toward having four-season interest, color and texture variation, and managing layering. Over the years we prune existing limbs and add or subtract more plants to meet our vision for the space. At last, we are satisfied with our creation and sit back to enjoy it for years to come. But wait. The plants keep growing no matter how much we scold them. Soon the yard has become jammed at the seams. What is a gardener to do, short of moving away to begin anew?

The first step is to have a plan. Do you want to bring your garden back to its original design; make a few tweaks to add more winter interest, late summer color or height; or initiate a major redo using a few of the structural plants that are now in place?

Once you have a vision, identify what you have and mark what you want to keep. If the overgrowth is a large space, start with a smaller area and work your way gradually through. Renovation can take months or even years so don't get overwhelmed in the beginning.

Remove all dead or diseased plants and any rogue plants that may have volunteered and those that are underperformers. Pull all weeds, not only because they overrun smaller plants, but they will compete with larger ones for water and nutrients. Make a clean edge between your border and the lawn. This will help visually delineate the space. Doing these three steps will give you a better idea of how to proceed.

Take note of the perennials that need to be dug and divided. Find out the best time of year for each plant to be separated and plan the digging accordingly. Replant extra starts in your own yard or give to friends and neighbors. Everyone loves free plants!

Larger shrubs and trees will probably need some pruning. Start by cutting out dead and crossing limbs as well as water sprouts. Some shrubs do best with gradual pruning, cutting out no more than one-third of the plant each year. Other hardy species such as *Hydrangea*, dogwood and lilac will come back renewed after a strong rejuvenating whack down to 6-10 inches from the ground. Like dividing perennials, each shrub or tree has a time of year that is the most advantageous time to cut. Know your plant before making any pruning decision.

Rather than totally removing some overgrown shrubs or conifers, you may want to remove the lower branches to let light filter through. This can maintain a structural element in the garden while keeping your privacy and offering habitat for birds and other creatures. By cutting away most of the side branches up to a certain height, the space revealed below can create space for smaller plantings

underneath. Sometimes removing lower branches reveals small plantings that were placed there years ago and have been overshadowed by their more aggressive neighbors. That is a lucky bonus!



In the Discovery Garden Meadow renovation, the unwanted plants were removed to make room for a new design. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Established gardens with mature shrubs and trees may house much wildlife. Take this into consideration before getting out the chainsaw. Judicious pruning can allow both you and your garden's critters to feel at home.

Once the design meets to your satisfaction, reward your border with a good layer of mulch to help maintain soil moisture, suppress weeds and amend the soil structure over time. Mulch also is a good visual background to make the colors in your garden pop.

If the overgrown garden is new to you, patience is advised. By waiting a year before undergoing drastic changes, you may find hidden treasures (such as *Epimedium*'s, spring and summer flowering bulbs, and self-seeding annuals) are already planted there. The sad looking shrub in the back you long to pull out may come into glorious color in the fall. See what you have before diving right in.

While waiting, you can start your renovation by cutting out dead and diseased material, extensively weeding and cutting a clean border edge while you plan your design. Take photos as the year progresses to remind you of the plants you wish to save, those that will need to be removed or pruned and what you may want to add in each season to make the garden your own.



Left: Plantings were done in phases. **Right:** The meadow started taking shape after the first year. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

What is the difference between a mature garden, an overgrown garden and a wildlife sanctuary? Call it what you like but remember that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You, the gardener, are the one to decide what your creation will become.



When a garden is this overgrown, it's time to do some judicious removal to make room for the plants you want to keep to thrive. *Photo by Kathy Wolfe / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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- “How to Makeover an Overgrown Garden.” Architecture Ideas, May 20, 2021.
[Give a Makeover to Overgrown Garden with These Amazing Tips \(architecturesideas.com\)](https://www.architecturesideas.com/how-to-makeover-an-overgrown-garden/)