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YOUR LIFE A LITTLE EASIER

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(Lower) LOW MAINTENANCE GARDENING

Five tips for making your life a little easier By Garry Menendez, ASLA

I hear the same request from 90 percent of my clients when we first meet to discuss their landscape needs: “low maintenance.” I understand the desire, but it also makes me want to (discreetly) roll my eyes. First, I feel compelled to differentiate just a wee bit. In my opinion, there is a difference between a “landscape” and a “garden,” just as there is most definitely a difference between a landscaper and a gardener. Parts of these definitions have to do with scale (a *landscape* is typically much larger than a *garden*) but many don’t make the distinction between the two.

But let me get back on track and talk about maintenance. This is another word that should perhaps be adjusted slightly. When you speak of the proper way to take care of your garden (I’m dropping “landscape” for the time being) you may want to use the word “management” rather than maintenance. To manage something is to allow for inevitable change. To maintain suggests keeping something in a static rather than dynamic state. NOW maybe I can stitch some of this together. Who out there knows of any garden worth visiting that isn’t always changing? Boom!

Rather than being quick to consider low maintenance as the ultimate goal, consider a horticultural paradise, one that requires a different approach to maintenance. What follows are five suggestions to hopefully help you see your garden with a new perspective. Warning: If you are a tidy control freak, you may want to flip to the Versailles Channel or something.

WHAT IS A “WEED”?

We’ve all heard this one before: A weed is just a plant in the wrong place. I know ... this can be a touchy subject, but learning to relax a little when it comes to taking care of your garden may require you to change your perspective a bit. Clover in the turf or wild violets in the flowerbeds



Top: A nice explosion of summer color has been created with this combination of daylily, balloon flower, and coneflower. There’s a small hidden path that allows access for viewing and occasional removal of anything undesired.

Bottom: Ivy is not a friend to this gardener, but with a bit of vigilant observation it’s easily held in check. Impatiens are placed sans any container in the cracks between rocks around the pond and will last until the first frost.



▲ Bed delineation is the key. Determine your hopefully very generous planting areas and let the rest become a smooth wave of lawn.

➔ If you don't have a compost bin you're missing out on some great "free" and rich soil amendment. This bin has a concrete floor with cinder block and heavy wire screen allowing this black gold to simply drop into the Tonka truck or be pulled out with a garden hoe.

➔➔ If you have deciduous trees – you have mulch. Most plants prefer a thick layer of leaf "duff" to any other mulch as its light and will continuously provide nutrients to the soil.



Facing page, top: When it comes to planting a pond be sure to hide at least fifty percent of the edge for a more natural effect.

Facing page, bottom: Allowing plants to mix and intermingle makes it hard for any visitor to know what belongs and what doesn't.

may send you running for the 2-, 4-D or other herbicides, but consider the fact that almost any plant controls erosion, absorbs CO₂ while emitting oxygen, and is perhaps beneficial to our pollinator community. So you may want to loosen your control a little. Of course there are those plants that require constant vigilance (redbud seedlings in my beds) but the more diverse your garden, the harder it is to tell a "weed" from something that belongs.

DRAW YOUR BATTLE LINES

Controlling a large garden from property line to property line can be daunting; at least if one manages it as they would a highly visited botanic attraction. To put this in perspective, imagine your property as a dartboard with the bull's eye being your home. Consider "zoning" your garden – areas closest to the bull's eye receive the most attention and the edges or zones nearer the

property lines are not fussed over quite as much. Often the results of such a management practice are mini "wild pockets" or even natural wildlife corridors ... if you can convince your neighbors to adopt the same low-key mindset.

BLACK MULCH IS FOR WIMPS

If you have trees you have mulch. I have a hard time understanding the concept of hauling natural leaf litter to the curb or bagging it only to replace this gift with *So&So's Black Mulch*. Is it really the color of the mulch you want to show off, or is it the great collection of plants you have nurtured? It's also a proven fact that most perennials and even woody plant material perform better with a fluffy leaf "duff" keeping their roots insulated and weeds at bay rather than the high density, store-bought mulch, which may actually repel water away from a plant if applied too often.





▲ These tulips were planted. The accompanying Star of Bethlehem flowers were not, but they make a great ephemeral addition in early spring.

Top: Nature's complimentary color wheel in action with woodland poppies and Virginia bluebells.

FILL THE VOIDS

Ask yourself this question: "If I am truly a plant lover, why am I even seeing mulch?" Support your local garden center, dig and divide what you have, or trade plants with fellow horticultural geeks. The more diversity you have in your garden, the better – both ecologically and from a management point of view. It's kind of hard to even find a misplaced plant if there aren't many empty spots. Although they are native, avoid super-aggressive plants such as river oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), Cherokee sedge (*Carex cherokeensis*), or sumac (*Rhus* spp.) if you don't have the space for them to multiply.

DON'T FORGET THE WATER

Sure, garden ponds don't exactly scream *low maintenance*, but what about a simple birdbath? Cleaning these a couple of times a week is a breeze and when you think about the benefits (increased wildlife) compared to the care required, it should be a no brainer to place a couple of water sources in your garden (and keep them full). Water features with submerged reservoirs (pondless) can bring an added dimension and fill your garden with pleasant white noise to drown out a neighbor's noisy HVAC unit. You may have to pump these nearly dry a few times a year and replace with some fresh water, but they are usually still lower maintenance than full-blown aquatic gardens. I have both types of water features and I get an immense amount of satisfaction from each (as do the critters).

So there you have it. Go ahead and give your garden a look over and see if there are places where you can relax a bit, let the natural processes help you, and then use your extra free time to simply enjoy your oasis. ☺

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