

## Less Work with a Low Maintenance Garden by Marcia Scott

Some of us want to, even need to, transition our plants from labor-gobbling beasts to manageable beauties. Of course, we still want a drop-dead gorgeous landscape but we don't want to be slaves to those gardens. Most likely we would be quite pleased with simply a good-looking yard, saving the fine gardening for the pages of magazines or the homes of the rich and famous. We can have a garden with lower maintenance needs and still achieve some of the dreams we have for our yards (such as that tranquil outdoor space). Maintenance should always be a primary consideration in any yard; it costs labor hours be it in actual dollars or sore back time. Our goal here is to create outdoor spaces that require LOWER maintenance, so we have more time to enjoy it.



There are tasks that exist in almost all yards such as weeding, irrigation maintenance, fertilizing, or pruning. It's just that some yards require many more hours of those basic tasks. Some generalities can be applied to high maintenance yards, and there are other basics that are common to many low maintenance yards. Some planting styles that usually require higher maintenance: vegetables and fruit trees (seasonally), rose gardens, 'English' and 'Cottage' perennial gardens, most lawns, formal hedges, and annual plantings (i.e. marigolds, petunias, etc.). Generally, plants that have large flowers or heavy flowering in more than two seasons annually



require extra maintenance effort; they often will need dead-heading (trimming off dead flower heads) and might need extra fertilizing and water to produce the prolific flowers.

Some planting styles that usually look decent even with lower maintenance: most shrub plantings, some select perennial gardens, ornamental grasses plantings, most ornamental trees, many water wise (drought tolerant) plantings, native plantings. Many of these lower maintenance plants aren't exceptionally showy since they don't have heavy flowering. However, with judicious plant choices and thoughtful plant groupings, a low maintenance garden can be both beautiful and satisfying.

If a low maintenance landscape is your primary goal, then you must choose your plants accordingly. Many people buy plants to satisfy feelings and attitudes: "That flower reminds me of my grandmother," "Lines of sheared hedges will establish order in my yard," "It won't be a garden without marigolds!". If you get your head in the game, you can choose plants with your low maintenance goal in mind, and we can help you with

some of your choices. Consider plants that won't need frequent bug and disease patrols, frequent dead-heading, regular shearing, etc – you get the picture.

Shrubs are the low-maintenance workhorses in the garden, many requiring only water and perhaps some fertilizer to give us flowers, striking foliage colors, interesting textures, and even fall color. To ensure that they are low maintenance, use plants that grow to an appropriate size for the allowable space. In other words, don't use a plant for a 3' space that eventually grows to 10,' you'll spend time and energy trying to keep the plant within its bounds after its first year.



That means you'll have to be satisfied with a smaller plant in the short term (no immediate gratification), but in the long run you'll be happier with your thoughtful choice. Consider the shrub's maintenance needs over the course of a year BEFORE you set your heart on having that particular plant.

Perennials usually require more maintenance than most shrubs as they often produce many flowers and may need to be cut back one or more times per year. They also might need fertilizing several times a year to support that heavy flowering. A 'select' perennial for low maintenance is one that isn't too needy: it can get by with one annual haircut, one annual fertilizing, do its own dead-heading or at least keep its flowers looking decent for weeks or even months. Believe it or not, there are some perennials that meet those criteria: Gaura, Wallflower (Erysimum), Euphorbia, and Salvias are a few we carry at the Nursery.

Native and water wise plants are usually very low maintenance (although they need regular water until established). They typically grow a bit slower (especially if they're kept on the lower water regimen that will keep them happy), but they'll reward your patience with a yard that requires very little labor from you. Many native plantings don't even like fertilizer! If you try and push these landscape styles to grow faster with extra water and frequent fertilizing, you'll create bug and disease problems, and could even kill some of the plants with your extra care. Many of us want to save water and save our own gardening energy, and the good news is that it's quite realistic to meet both of these goals in your garden!



You can change your yard in small pieces, but be aware of the new plants' water needs – make sure their needs are compatible with the existing watering system. Visit us at the Nursery and we'll help you get started with your low maintenance plant choices.

*"We Make Your Garden Smile"*