

LANDSCAPING TO FIT YOUR LIFESTYLE

BY BARBARA REED

One of the most appealing features of any home or property is its landscaping. Like nothing else, landscaping has the ability to transform a home into a calm vacation retreat, an elegant estate, a garden paradise or a welcoming and functional outdoor living space. We love what landscaping can do for our home, but we don't always love the work that goes into keeping everything healthy and beautiful.

If you prefer to spend your spare time enjoying the outdoors rather than doing landscaping chores, you are not alone. According to the American Institute of Architects Home Design Trends survey, low-maintenance landscaping is among the list of must-have home upgrades. This not only applies to year-round residences, but becomes even more of an imperative for those who own vacation homes. During the all-too-few warm and sun-filled months in the Lake Geneva and Chicagoland areas, who wouldn't rather be boating, swimming, fishing or doing just about anything outside instead of chores?

So, you already know that you'd like to spend less time on landscape maintenance, but how do you go about putting it into practice? Start by deciding just how much time per week you want to spend on outdoor chores. The latest lawn care poll by Consumer Reports National Research Center reveals that homeowners should be prepared to dedicate an average of 6.5 hours per week working outdoors during growing season. If devoting most of the day to lawn and landscape care during precious week-

end hours isn't your idea of leisure time, it's time to explore low maintenance landscaping options.

FIRST, A WORD ABOUT BUDGETS

The solutions you choose to reduce landscape maintenance will depend upon your budget. An obvious answer is to hire a trusted and experienced landscaping firm to design and maintain your outdoor living space for you. This may not be an option for every homeowner or budget. Decide what you can spend on maintenance, combine that knowledge with how much time you want to devote to it yourself and you have the basis for evaluating the various solutions available.

PLAN AHEAD FOR LESS WORK LATER

As homeowners, sometimes we have the ability to plan our landscaping from the very beginning as in new home construction. For many of us, when we purchase an existing home we also inherit the previous owner's concept of landscaping – good or bad. In any event, changes to your home landscape can be planned so that every shrub, tree, flower bed and structure serves a definite purpose.

According to Ryan Taheny, president of Ryco Landscaping, Inc., a premier landscaping firm serving the Lake Geneva and Chicagoland areas, planning and creating a low-maintenance landscape might take a bit more effort at first, but you'll reap the benefits immediately and for many years to come.

Taheny recommends starting your landscape planning by evaluating the type of maintenance needed for the various plant materials and structural elements selected or already existing in the landscape design. For example, does mowing, edging and trimming take more time than you have to give? Do your trees and shrubs need pruning every year to keep them the right size? Are plants wilting under the hot summer sun? Once you've identified the issues, you can move on to the solutions.

TURF TRICKS

Reducing the size of your lawn can be one of the simplest ways to reduce maintenance. Less turf requires less mowing, fertilizing, weed control, trimming and watering. Planting ground cover and installing well-placed pathways can eliminate areas of turf. Avoid planting grass in areas that are too shady, too dry or wet, or too steep to be mowed safely. Use a ground cover and other plants better suited to these areas. Keep lawn fertilization at minimum levels to maintain health but require less mowing.

TRIM THE NEED FOR EDGING

Mowing grass isn't the only time-consuming maintenance chore. Edging planting beds and trimming around trees, walkways, patios and other structures can eat up a lot of time. Ryco Landscaping offers these time-saving tips:





Arrange plants carefully. Scattered, cluttered plant groupings not only need hand edging and weeding, but also complicate your mowing.

Placing a gravel or mulch bed or ground cover around trees eliminates the need for trimming.

Use edging between the lawn and gravel walks or drives and around tree beds. This eliminates tedious trimming and helps keep mulch and stones out of your lawn.

CHOOSE PLANTS YOU CAN IGNORE

The first thing to do is choose plants that require very little maintenance. If you'd rather not spend your time raking leaves or pine needles, select trees that do not frequently shed like White Pine and Austrian Pine. Avoid fruit-bearing plants that make a mess. Shrubs like 'Bird's Nest' Spruce and 'Little Gem' Dwarf Norway Spruce are hardy varieties that do not require much attention and make very little mess.

When it comes to flowers, perennials and native plants are your best choice. Choose varieties that are drought tolerant and don't require dead heading. Native plants are well-suited to our climate and have the added benefit of requiring less water, fertilizer and pesticides to stay healthy and vigorous. In all cases, keep your planting beds covered with a maximum of three inches of mulch (depending upon the plant material) to retain moisture and reduce weeds.

RIGHT-SIZE YOUR PLANTS

A common mistake many homeowners make is to choose plants that grow too big for the space in which they are planted. Once the plant reaches maturity, the only way to keep it tidy and properly sized is to prune it. Avoid the temptation to purchase larger plants to fill in the space more quickly. If your planting space is three feet high by four feet wide, be careful not to choose a plant that will eventually reach six or eight feet high.

Look for slower growing plants to eliminate or reduce the need for pruning of most trees and shrubs. Lastly, choose a few species and stay with them. Fewer varieties, but more plants of the same variety, not only create continuity in the design but also are easier to maintain.

BLOOMS WITHOUT THE BOTHER

Flowers require more maintenance on a square foot basis than any other plant in the landscape. However, flowers are usually the most desired plants for color. If you just can't resist the colorful appeal of flowers, plant varieties with low-maintenance requirements. Examples include peonies, daylilies, summer phlox and hardy chrysanthemums.

As an alternative, careful selection of flowering ground covers, shrubs, and trees can give you the spring and summer blooms you crave without the high maintenance required by annual or perennial flowers.

WHEN DEER LOVE YOUR LANDSCAPING

In heavily-wooded areas, deer can decimate landscaping requiring constant upkeep and costly replacement. The first line of defense is to plant species that deer do not like. Generally, deer avoid plants with sticky, aromatic, or hairy leaves. They rarely eat ornamental grasses. Examples of deer-resistant plants include shrubs such as barberry or juniper and perennials such as astilbe, bee balm and coreopsis. Of course, hungry deer will eat just about anything, but the likelihood of them grazing on your shrubs and perennials will be less if you plant varieties they avoid unless starving.

There are a number of good commercial deer repellents that you can spray on plants, but be careful to reapply them any time it rains. It is best to rotate different repellents because deer become accustomed to the taste or smell of one product.

CONTROL WATER TO YOUR BEST ADVANTAGE

In some cases, you may have too much water on your property. Standing water can kill grass and other plantings, attract mosquitoes, make a portion of your yard unusable and even cause flooding inside your home. Solutions include redirecting downspouts away from the foundation or low spots, re-grading the lawn to direct surface water, and installing dry wells, French drains or dry creek beds to collect and disperse excess water.

Another option that is gaining popularity — rain gardens. "Go with the flow" and create a rain garden with plants that thrive on an abundance of water. A rain garden is a shallow, plant-filled depression that catches and holds water, filters out pollutants and helps replenish local underground water supplies.

Don't fight Mother Nature. Use the excess moisture to create a lush garden of water-loving plants while helping the environment.

In other cases, you might find your property suffers from too little water. During the dog days of summer, your lawn, shrubs and perennials may be thirsting for moisture you don't have the time to provide. Native species and drought-tolerant plants survive and even flourish with minimal moisture. A sufficient layer of mulch also goes a long way to help retain water.

If these solutions don't meet your needs, you may want to consider installing an irrigation system. Today's irrigation systems promote water conservation and are easy to operate. Best of all, they save you hours of work uncoiling hoses, dragging them across your yard and setting up sprinklers.

GIVE YOURSELF A HEAD START

An affordable way to reduce your maintenance chores may be to enlist the aid of a landscaper to start the season off right with a thorough spring clean-up. Once perennials are cut back, remaining leaves are removed and planting beds are raked and edged, you'll have an easier time keeping your landscaping looking its best.

In heavily-wooded areas, fall clean-up may be an even wiser investment. If left on the lawn, leaves can destroy grass which can be costly to replace. Raking and removing leaves can be extremely time-consuming. Plus, you need to dispose of all those leaves. Excess leaves can also clog your gutters and cause a number of structural problems, not to mention one more maintenance chore to deal with.

Keeping your home and property looking well-maintained, healthy and beautiful can become a real chore — but it doesn't have to be. As the days get longer, the sun gets warmer and the world turns green again, there's just one question to ask. How will you be spending your weekends? 🌿