

Aging Gardens; Aging Gardeners

Many of the homes in High Desert are over 10 years old with landscapes that are now mature. So we are gardening in a different environment than when the landscape was installed. You may be faced with some of the following situations: trees that have branches rubbing walls, roofs, or hanging over walkways or streets; shrubs that are much larger than you expected – either too tall, too wide, or both; volunteers that came in and placed themselves, just not in good places. Or the landscaper may have installed inappropriate plants which died or maybe they are still alive, but suffering. Part of your landscape may now have shade instead of sun. While your house may show some wear over time, a landscape can look totally different. That's what happens with material that grows and/or dies.

So it's time to look at your landscape and decide if it needs to be rejuvenated. Do you like the look? Is it serving the functions you need like entertainment, utility, beauty, aesthetics? Can you still care for it or does it need to be lower maintenance?

Every year I evaluate my landscape and decide what changes I'll make. The important point in this exercise is to maintain a sense of design. Several years ago I removed two Scotch brooms because they had taken over a nearby walkway. I replaced them with Karl Foerster feather reed grass, a sand sage Artemisia, a trellis with a coral honeysuckle vine, and a prairie sage (salvia). I needed to maintain a sense of height with some evergreen (evergray) elements. I wanted to add different color and seasonal interest. Another year I took out a cliffrose which I loved but it was cutting off my view of the mountains from the patio. I replaced it with a small deciduous tree (Mexican buckeye), an aster, and some daylilies. I was trying to add plants that maintained the sense of size, but provided more seasonal interest. There was a nearby rosemary that maintained the green color in winter. I didn't think I needed another evergreen plant.

In the front yard I tried to install a small rock garden. It didn't work so the next year we installed a fountain urn (after getting approval from the Modifications Committee). Now I need to fill in some bare spots around the fountain with some type of groundcover.

This year I am finally giving up on my one remaining mariola plant. It has been suffering since the 2010 freeze when its two sisters croaked. I replaced them with an ornamental oregano which uses almost no water and blooms most of the summer. Now I'm trying to think of a plant that has soft foliage, is gray in color, and will stay small. I'm still working on what that might be! Maintaining a pleasing design is the "art" part of gardening.

Also, not only are our landscapes aging, so are we. I'm finding it harder to physically garden although I know it is good exercise for me and I enjoy being outside. So now I plan my tasks better and I use more ergonomic tools. I have a kangaroo (a collapsible, stand-alone container ideal for yard waste, debris collection) that holds a large garbage bag and makes trash pickup or pruning trimmings easier. It folds flat for storage which is handy. I have pruners and loppers that give me a power advantage and help with repetitive motion. I have a Korean tool, a Ho Mi digger, that helps me pull up irrigation staples, dig a hole, and scrape out the dirt. I'm looking at a new garden cart that rolls very nicely. Using the cart means I don't have to lean over as far and it takes pressure off my back. I have a lovely stand up weeder called a circle hoe that makes it easy to get the weed under shrubs as well as the more obvious weeds. I also mix up my tasks more and stop between tasks to do backbends so my back survives the day.

I have the equipment I use together stored together. So when it's time to fertilize plants everything I need is handy: the fish emulsion, liquid seaweed, Epsom salts, liquid iron, and Superthrive. I have multiple water faucets so I keep the amendments near the garage door, put them into a 5 gallon bucket, and carry the bucket to the faucet closest to the plants I want to fertilize before adding water. This means I don't have to carry a bucket full of water around the house.

For the heavier tasks I have two types of landscapers I use. For heavy tasks where knowledge and training aren't critical I use what I call cheap labor. With larger shrubs and trees I sometimes need help and here I'm willing to spend the big bucks to get someone with the knowledge and skill to do the job correctly. And I think about what tasks I want to do, can do, and enjoy doing and try to save those tasks for me. The remaining tasks may require my oversight, but I don't have to do them. And sometimes I rethink the plants/design so it requires less effort.

So take some time to evaluate your landscape and yourself and keep gardening for the exercise and the joy. I'm having an open garden on July 4 from 8am to noon. Come visit and we can talk about what I've done – early is better than late and the daylilies will be in bloom – 5601 Mariola Place.