

Preventive Maintenance in the Landscape

For many people taking care of a landscape is hard work. Are there ways to design and install a landscape that can reduce the work load and leave you time for the gardening you want to do rather than have to do? The answer is yes. Even if you have someone else do the work, reducing time in the garden for the maintenance crew reduces your costs.

What causes most garden “work” for you? Is it mowing the grass, pruning, weeding, deadheading, or general garden clean up?

If mowing grass is the problem:

- Reduce the amount of grass you have - less grass means less mowing
- If the lawn is for show and not needed for a play area for the kids or grandkids, convert the lawn to a prairie and mow it once a year. Prairies of buffalo and blue grama need less care, water, and you can use compost for the fertilizer.
- Convert the lawn to flower beds, a small patio, or add a shade structure.
- Let the grass grow a little higher before mowing – this is actually good for the lawn in the heat of summer. The taller grass shades the roots from the sun and protects them from the wind.
- Cut back on your watering and fertilizing and see what the effect is. Keep cutting back until there’s a negative effect. Most homeowners overwater and definitely overfertilize their lawns. Slow release fertilizers are better for the soil and the grass. High nitrogen fertilizers give the lawn a flush of green, but then fade as the microbes in the soil gorge on the nitrogen. There’s little nitrogen left for the rest of the season.

If pruning is the problem:

- Get rid of anything that requires lots of pruning, reseeds too much, or causes you allergies (for me that’s Russian sage dust) and replace with something that requires less pruning or that fits in the space.
- If you have a shrub that’s growing too quickly, remove or reduce the amount of water to it. Overwatering native shrubs like chamisa, apache plume, and fourwing saltbush make them grow too fast and get woody. Walk the foothills trails and see how big they grow when watered by nature. I’ve removed the drippers to my Russian sage and I don’t have problems with suckers and I prune it hard (leaving about 8-12”) each year.
- Select plants that fit the space at maturity. Fill in with annuals if the initial bareness bothers you or use containers for the space and move them elsewhere as the plant(s) grow.
- Select plants that require little pruning, like turpentine bush, mahonia(s), cotoneasters, and conifers.

If weeding is the problem:

- Reduce the bare space in your landscape. Plants we call weeds are pioneers, the first ones to take hold. Weeds are hardy plants as well so use ground covers or mulches to reduce places for seeds to take hold.
- Keep existing weeds from reseeding. That can be accomplished by pulling them up or mowing them before they reach the seed stage.

- Learn to recognize them when they're young – they're a lot easier to pull. If the ground is moist, it's even easier. And don't wait until the roots are tenaciously grounded in the soil or the weed block fabric.
- Don't disturb the soil by hoeing or cultivating. Every time you turn over the soil you expose new weed seeds to the light and that increases the chances that the seeds will germinate.
- Cast your shadow over the landscape. Every time you're out enjoying your landscape look for weeds and pull the ones you see. Pulling a few weeds daily or even weekly is much easier than waiting to pull them semi-annually.
- Remove volunteer plants that thrive along sidewalks and in cracks. Chamisa seeds, for example, love to germinate near sidewalks because they get some shade and they capture water runoff. Pulling them when they're small keeps them from taking over the sidewalk or driveway.

Remember: if an area attracts weeds, unless you change the conditions that make the area attractive you'll have to keep weeding – just removing them isn't enough. That may be an overspray area of lawn, a gravel mulch (make it deeper), or bare ground.

If deadheading is the problem:

- I often suggest that people lower their standards! You can leave the seed heads on and they'll go away naturally. I often remove the seed heads for the vigorous reseeder just so they don't take over.
- Pay someone else to do it!

If general garden cleanup is the problem:

- Consider what tasks are required that you don't like to do (for us that's clean the pond) and hire someone to do it.
- Keep thorned plants like roses and prickly pear cactus away from areas where they can catch trash.
- Remove trash/weed catching plants, e.g. spreading cotoneasters.
- Change growing beds to hardscape.
- Select trees and shrubs that won't drop trash on your patio, deck, or walkways.
- Select fruitless or seedless plant varieties, e.g. desert willows.
- Lower your standards. Nature is happy with leaf litter and it's good for the soil, returning the minerals and providing free mulch that reduces water evaporation.
- If you have erosion problems, follow the meandering water flow and dig a trench or swale which can be filled with newspapers or straw. Put a berm on the low side and cover the trench with dirt. If you're losing soil at the top of a slope, create a raised edge and don't allow the water to "overtop" the soil. This is the beginning of deeper erosion problems and you'll have to create a path for the water so it flows more slowly. Or install plants that have a network of roots, e.g. one seed juniper, prairie sage, or yerba mansa. Putting them on the bermed side allows them to draw from the extra water in the swale.

Whatever your problem, get outdoors and enjoy the view, the weather, and life.