

Low Maintenance Landscaping Tips

by Skip Richter, Travis County Extension Director

There is no such thing as a maintenance free landscape. While some wildscape designs can come pretty close, the fact that it is a designed landscape will necessitate some maintenance to maintain its form and beauty.

Some folks out west have given up on landscaping altogether,

electing to spread rock across the property and stick a few cacti in here and there. Well that is low maintenance for sure, but in most of the state we get enough rainfall to do better than that. A well maintained



Desert "zero" scape

landscape moderates temperatures, reduces reflected heat, and adds to overall appeal and value of the home.

With a little advanced planning we can create a beautiful landscape that is functional, meets the needs of the entire family, and yet requires a minimum of time and money to maintain. Too many folks begin their landscaping at a garden center when they see some new plants they think are pretty. The new plants come home and the proud owner wanders around a bit looking for a spot to plant them.

This is how we get those postage stamp flower beds out there in the middle of the lawn. We spend the first half of the season mowing around them and the second half mowing over them as weeds or an invasive turfgrass moves in like Sherman through Georgia!

In case some of you are feeling a bit offended, just keep in mind that I speak from personal experience. The more of a **plant** person you are, the more likely it is that you are landscape challenged and have a place that

looks like a bomb went off in a garden center and the plants pretty much grew where they landed! With so many plants and so little time, who has time to plan or design?

Someday, maybe they'll pass a law that requires potential plant purchasers to show a plan indicating where this plant will go before they are allowed to make the purchase. If not there will be a mandatory 5 day cooling off period before they are allowed to make the purchase...gosh, I hope not.

Planning is really worth every bit of time you put into it. There are basic principles of landscaping that are important to consider. However this article will focus on aspects of landscaping that help reduce maintenance needs down the line. Whether you are installing a new landscape or revamping an established one, by following a few simple suggestions you can end up with a wonderful low maintenance landscape that leaves you plenty of time for other activities...such as shopping for more plants.

Keep it Simple

The more elaborate you make a landscape, the more features you add, the more maintenance you will likely have. Great designs are often quite simple.

Every extra foot of bed edge, rockwork and fence line can mean more weeding or edging. Elaborate plantings with an extensive variety of plants need more attention to keep them tidy and attractive. Special landscape features such as fountains while attractive require additional maintenance.



Angular corners make mowing difficult

Design With Maintenance in Mind

Keep maintenance at the forefront as you plan your landscape. Group plants with similar care needs and place higher maintenance plantings near the home where the added beauty may justify the added work.

As you move outward from the home, design areas that need less maintenance. Place the majority of your time and money where you spend time outdoors. This is a type of zoning with high maintenance zones blending into zones with medium and finally low maintenance.

Make beds large and sweeping. Combine several small beds into a large one to reduce mowing time. Avoid sharp angles. Gradual curves are easier to mow and more aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

If you have several trees close together in the lawn, consider creating a large bed around them. This will save time mowing and edging around each trunk and provide a place to toss the leaves as a natural mulch.

Install edging to delineate between turf and bed areas. This will prevent St. Augustine and some Zoysias

from invading, but not Bermudagrass. When buying edging material avoid the cheap stuff as it will not hold up. Metal edging or a better quality plastic product will last longer and look great. A word about "cottage gardens"

is in order. These haphazard designs seem to be the ultimate in low care. Just let the plants plant themselves, right? Well, this is true to some extent, but in order for a cottage garden to look decent you will need to do some work removing the overzealous plants invading others' private space by aggressive rhizomes or excessive reseeding. Otherwise your cottage garden will degrade into a bad case of "plant anarchy" producing a jungle into which the family cat fears to tread!

Let Nature Maintain It For You

When the setting allows place some natural areas around the periphery of your landscape, especially if your property adjoins a natural area. These natural areas will receive little if any care, but can contribute nicely to the overall effect. Select native trees and shrubs for these areas, or perhaps some tall native clumping grasses for sunny areas. Include some that bloom for seasonal interest. These natural areas are another place to toss extra leaves for another maintenance advantage.



Curved stone pathway with wood mulch

Some folks have relegated most of their landscape to natural areas and just maintain a small spot where they can relax and entertain guests. It all comes down to what is aesthetically acceptable to you, but extensive design comes at a maintenance cost.

How Much Is Enough?

Now I know we Texans like every thing big. But big means big maintenance. Lawns are nice, but do you really need a football field? Just because you own the property is no reason to cover it all with grass. Lawns need mowing, watering and fertilizing, or they will get thin and weedy...which in turn brings the need for hand pulling or spraying.

There are areas where turf thrives and areas where it does not. Deep shade, shallow soil underlain by rock, and coarse unamended sand are all areas where turf will be an ongoing problem or maintenance chore. I'm all for a nice turf area. Let's just plan its size and location, and prepare the soil if need be to reduce maintenance problems in the future.

This same principle applies to other types of plant material. Flower beds are gorgeous but require a lot of maintenance. As I indicated earlier, the overall landscape size

should be considered with your family interests and maintenance time in mind. You can always expand the area or add more features later if you wish.



Minimal turf in a small back yard

Start Off Weed Free

Weeds are much easier to deal with before your turfgrass and other landscape plants are in. This is especially true for perennial weeds such as Bermudagrass, Nutsedge, wild blackberry vines, and Johnsongrass, to name a few of the more notorious invaders.

Whether you dig, spray or a combination of the two, do all you can to get rid of weeds so you can start with a clean slate. There are weed block fabrics on the market that can keep most weeds down. However, with a weed block fabric down you can't easily add compost to the soil later or plant new successions of bedding

plants. So these weed fabrics are best used for shrub beds and around trees.

Choose Easy Care Plants

Let's face it. Some plants, like some people, are just plain high maintenance. Others need just a little help getting established and then do quite well on their own. Trees and shrubs generally require less maintenance, with exceptions such as roses and camellias that may need a little extra spraying and/or pruning.

Slow growing and dwarf types require less pruning and aren't likely to need to be attacked on a regular basis to keep them in bounds. If you plant evergreen shrubs keep in mind that shearing them into box or other shapes means regular trimming and much more work than maintaining them in a more natural shape or form.

Choose plants that are adapted to your area and not prone to disease or insect attack. Most types of Eucalyptus for example while widely planted are magnets for powdery mildew and/or scale, and should be avoided.

Annual flowers can keep you busy, planting, fertilizing, deadheading (in some cases), and then pulling them out to replant. To keep an area colorful you may be making 3 or more color changes a year. Perennials are a bit less trouble, but still need some grooming and feeding. Every so often they may also need dividing to keep them in top shape.



High maintenance plants, but great use of mulch

This is certainly not to say that we should avoid flowers...may it never be!...just that to minimize maintenance, choose where you want them to go carefully to get maximum effect from minimum effort.

Clumping ornamental grasses are underutilized in our landscapes. They are very low care and add an

attractive feature with the long lines and graceful movement in the wind. Cut them back in late winter and provide a little fertilizer and you're pretty much done with their maintenance for the year.

Don't crowd plants into a small space. Crowding makes it more difficult to work around plants and costs more initially as you are purchasing more plants than you need. Tightly spaced plants prevent good air circulation which can sometimes increase the incidence of diseases. Roses are an example of a plant that is more prone to foliar diseases when crowded.

Choose the Best Turf

What is the best turf species? There isn't one. Actually there is but it is different for each situation. Your aesthetic preferences certainly weigh in, but so does drought tolerance, sunlight exposure, amount of foot traffic, and landscape design style.

Buffalo is great when used west of Interstate 35 in a native or natural style landscape. You don't mow it but twice a year and it gets about 6 inches high and lays over for a mini meadow look. You just have to remember that "it's okay to be tan in summer". While it can take the drought, it will turn brown until the next rain. Most folks can't get into that look. But you can't get more low maintenance than that!

St. Augustine is maligned for being high maintenance. But in shade it is the grass of choice. It can take a lot of shade and in such conditions needs very little water. I have some areas beneath the dense shade of some tall live oaks that I may only have to water once or twice during the summer in order to keep them alive.

Another of St. Augustine's positive attributes is that it is tolerant of an infrequent mowing schedule and does not look as bad as most grasses after a long overdue mowing.

For higher traffic areas Bermuda and Zoysia are great choices. They do require regular mowing to look their best. Bermuda is especially invasive too and needs more frequent fertilizer applications to stay at the top of its game.

Mulch Your Cares Away

Mulching gives a great return on your time. When you lay down a thick layer of mulch annual weed seeds will be held at bay for the season. Watering will be reduced and over a few seasons as the mulch breaks down there will even be a release of nutrients to the plants.

Mulching is easy to do and makes garden beds look better too. As I mentioned earlier landscape fabric can help deter weeds, but a good layer of mulch will work just fine and can be pulled back for planting, fertilizing, and reworking the soil if needed.

Invest in Irrigation Design

Summertime heat puts a demand on our plants that rainfall can seldom match. So out come the water hoses and sprinklers. Now hose dragging is a great way to work off extra pounds, but I can think of more enjoyable ways to spend the day than chasing the dry spots around the landscape with a sprinkler.

Automatic irrigation systems certainly take a lot of work out of summer watering. It is important however that they are well designed. A poorly designed system wastes water, and therefore money, and may increase maintenance headaches as you replace poorly functioning sprinkler heads.

When possible install drip or micro sprinkler irrigation to shrub and flower beds. Drip applies water more efficiently and by not wetting the foliage may reduce some plant disease problems.



Microjet irrigation head

A good timer can also make watering easier. Just make sure and use it properly and avoid watering more often than is necessary to keep the plants healthy.

These are a few tips to keep your maintenance chores to a minimum. Just remember the more elaborate and extensive your landscape the more likely you are to spend more time out there keeping it in shape. You can have a simple design that is also quite beautiful. So do some planning, looking, and thinking before building a new landscape or revamping an old one. Your time will be well spent.