

Don't let your garden be a time hog

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Even those of us who love to garden as a hobby have come to appreciate that it's no fun to have a landscape that requires tons of time to maintain. If you are finding that your landscape is taking more time and effort than you want to give it, read on for some ideas on what you can do.

- Time hog No. 1 — Big, manicured lawns.

Not only do lawns take time to mow and edge, we often obsess about weeds, moss, fertilization, sparse growth and growing the most perfect lawn on the block. If we are going to obsess, shouldn't it be about golfing or boating?

Consider removing some lawn to create sweeping beds or islands of low-maintenance plants, including small leaved trees, flowering shrubs and easy-to-grow ground covers. Why small leaved trees? In fall, the leaves will not have to be raked.

Convert some of your lawn to a patio, deck or gazebo. Reducing the amount of lawn you have reduces the amount of time you spend week after week, year after year.

- Time hog No. 2 — Watering.

Unless you have an irrigation system or a drought-tolerant garden, you may find yourself lugging hoses and sprinklers around all summer.

Reduce the amount of watering your lawn and garden needs. Lawns that are maintained a little higher (2 ½ to 3 inches) will grow longer roots that will have access to more soil moisture. Water lawns once per week in the early morning hours. One inch of water per week is all that is usually required for optimal growth and health of lawns. Irrigate only to supplement lack of rain in summer.

Use mulch and soaker hoses in your garden beds. This combination makes efficient use of water and your time. And, speaking of time, buy a timer for your garden faucet. You can set it and forget it.

- Time hog No. 3 — Pruning.

Whacking away at overgrown plants is not much fun unless you are Edward Scissorhands. It is common for trees, shrubs and hedges to grow larger and taller than you expected.

Plants that are pruned to fit a space often end up looking unnatural. Flat sides and tops are for boxes not shrubs and trees. Over-pruning jeopardizes the health of the plant, as well.

Get radical. Remove plants that require pruning to maintain their size. Choose something more appropriate. Do some research, get the opinions of a professional, read the tags at the nursery. Choosing the “right plant for the right place” is not just a catchy gardening phrase. It will help you save time.

- Time hog No. 4 — Needy plants.

It’s been my experience that when a plant needs too much time, water, fertilization and care to grow well, that plant is not the best choice for your garden or landscape. Here are a few examples of needy plants:

- Time piggy No. 1 — Thirsty plants.

Moisture-loving plants need to be planted in a location that stays moist throughout the summer. Elsewhere, they will struggle without your intervention. Instead, consider using plants that will thrive in the conditions found naturally in your yard. If it is not moist, look for plants that will do well in drier conditions.

- Time piggy No. 2 — Weeds.

Need I say more about these time piggies? A good offense against weeds is the best defense against hours of tedious work. However, avoid the impulse to use chemical warfare. Mulch bare soil to suppress weed growth. Three to 4 inches of wood chips, compost, even organically treated grass clippings on the veggie garden, will do a good job mulching the soil. Another proactive approach against a summer of weeding is offered by my friend, author Ann Lovejoy. She says, “Whenever you see a weed, pull it. Don’t delay, no matter what you are wearing!”

When you want more time to enjoy your outdoors, garden smarter, not harder.

Ladd Smith is the co-owner of In Harmony Sustainable Landscapes, Bothell.