

Gardening to Work Less, Play More

One great thing about a garden is that it is never 'done'.

Now, if you don't like to garden – or cannot find the time – this statement might make you shudder.

On the other hand, if you have joined the growing population of gardeners, this statement is music to your ears.

Why is a garden never finished? The short answer is that a garden is composed, at least in part, of living, growing organisms. These organisms (the plants in your garden) breathe, eat, drink, grow and reproduce. They are dynamic.

The necessary inputs that allow your landscape plants to be all they can be are referred to as cultural requirements. Not culture in the usual sense, for example dramatics, art, or music (although it's been said that talking to your plants helps them grow!).

Rather, a plant's cultural requirements refer to the environment in which they are placed: sun exposure, water availability, soil type, and temperature extremes, for example.

Paying attention to the cultural requirements of a plant is important. Ideally, these needs are considered when planning and designing your landscape. Many homeowners, however, have to work with an 'inherited' landscape -- the landscape that was in place when they purchased the home.

This could be a good thing. A mature landscape, complete with shade trees and conifers, flowering shrubs and perennials, and a practical lawn size should be relatively easy to maintain, depending on the selected species.

Or, it could be a 'not-so-good' thing. A mature landscape that is not thoughtfully designed can present considerable maintenance issues.

This brings me to a cultural requirement often overlooked: enough space for the plant to grow to mature size. For example, that perfectly shaped, six-foot Colorado blue spruce will grow. And grow. A mature Colorado blue spruce can top 50 feet in height and 30 feet in width.

Consider the mature **height** of trees: roofline, overhead wires; mature **width**: distance to house, driveway, property line; and **root system**: distance to hardscape, house foundation. Many evergreens and deciduous trees look silly if pruned or (heaven forbid!) topped to control it's size. It also dramatically adds to maintenance work.

It is tempting to fill in spaces in a new landscape by planting ornamental species closely. The same rule applies – leave enough room for the **mature** size of the plant and cover the bare soil with an organic mulch or interplant with edible vegetables, herbs or fruit. Planning for the full-grown plant reduces pruning, dividing, and transplanting maintenance. It also saves money should you have to permanently remove overgrown plants from the landscape.

Other cultural requirements also affect mature size, overall plant health, and maintenance chores. If you plant a species in part shade when it needs full sun, the plant will grow leggy and stressed, inviting pests. Alternately, a plant that needs full sun but is placed in a shady spot cannot thrive. Remember an enlarging tree canopy creates shade.

A waterwise plant that is overwatered will grow wildly, may prolifically self-propagate, require additional pruning, or give up completely. Some species, such as most ornamental grasses will flop if grown in overly fertile soil or when fertilized.

If you are planting species in soil they cannot tolerate, you will either have to regularly amend the soil or replace unhealthy or dead plants. Plants not hardy to our winter or summer temperatures will not survive into their second year.

When planning a low-maintenance garden, ensure your selected plants are popped into a spot they can claim as their 'forever home'. Choosing waterwise plants – and only giving them the moisture they need to thrive – is the easiest, surefire way to maintaining your gardening less, but enjoying it more.

Did you know? The benefits of using organic mulch include: keeps moisture in the soil, regulates soil temperature, adds organic matter to build a healthy soil for plants and beneficial underground organisms, and reduces weeding maintenance.

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