Low-care Gardening

By Jason Miller

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Planning, research and smart plant choices can shrink your maintenance duties.

If you're like me, you're still digging out from under the December snowstorms. You're not going to be doing much yard work in the near future except scooping and tossing those mounds of slushy white stuff. Why not take a moment to examine your landscape and work out a strategy for enjoying it more while maintaining it less?

I'm not talking about neglecting your garden or cutting corners. I'm talking about low-care gardening, an approach that often demands more thought and planning on the front end than you or your home builder might have put into your current yard.

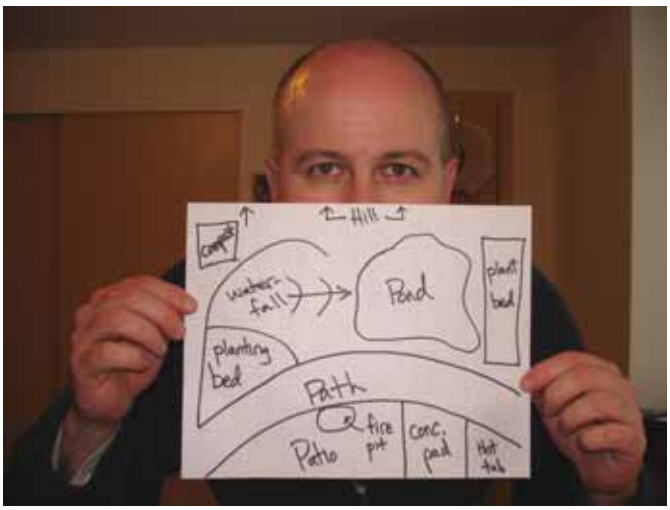
Let's be honest, here: We've all seen the landscaping shortcuts that builders and homeowners take to quickly pretty up a yard and make it more sales-worthy. A few flowers and a half dozen shrubs go in, then pre-grown turf is rolled out. Boom! Instant curb appeal!

But appeal at what cost? If you're like many homeowners, you may have walked out your front door last summer, taken a look at that lawn, and wished you didn't have to spend so much time watering, fertilizing, weeding and mowing it. If so, you might consider replacing some of that lawn with a low-care garden that can be more visually satisfying than manicured grass.

The aim of low-care gardening is not to scrimp on maintenance, but instead to choose low-care plants, placing them in such a way that they are the primary focal points in your garden.

Step 1: Paint a picture

Pre-plan the planting areas that you want to change. Grab a pen and paper, and sketch a master plan of what you want your yard to look like. Don't feel like your drawing should rival a William Turner watercolor; just get your general layout down in black and white, including the desired shape of the planting beds and their rough relationship to each other. Keep in mind, though, that the beds alone aren't the most crucial factor in a low-maintenance garden. The actual plants and their special needs are.



When planning a low-care garden, start by sketching a rough landscape plan that includes the placement of your planting beds. Photo by Jason Miller.

Step 2: Test your soil
The pH (acidic vs. alkaline) of your soil is very important to know before you select and buy any new plants, for you'll want to group plants in each bed according to their special growing requirements. To learn the pH of your soil, get a soil analysis. You can do it yourself with a pH meter (designed for homeowner use) or you can have it professionally tested. I like to use and recommend the University of Massachusetts at Amherst's soil-test services; a PDF of instructions and order form is posted online at www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/soilbrochdec2003.pdf.

Low-care gardening needs to incorporate a soil test into its strategy, to determine soil pH and needed nutrients. With its pH of 7.8 (highly alkaline), the soil in Concrete needs to be amended to lower it toward a more neutral pH. Concrete Master Gardener Jason Miller uses elemental sulfur treatments to accomplish this. Photo by Jason Miller.

Many gardeners are tempted to skip the soil analysis, but one of the biggest mistakes a person can make in designing a low-care garden is to add an alkaline-loving plant to an acidic bed. Besides, if you add any kind of fertilizer to a bed without knowing what the soil requires, that's like taking medication without first diagnosing the illness. Not the wisest approach, right?

Step 3: Find out what makes plants tick
All plants have different growing requirements, so research the needs of each plant you're considering adding to your landscape or garden. Check first if the plant will easily survive in our climate or zone. (Skagit County includes climate zones 7 and 8.) Other crucial factors to consider are whether each plant needs full sun exposure, partial sun, or full shade to grow well; whether it grows best in a sandy, loamy or clay soil; and if it will require more or less water than the other plants in the same bed. Make sure the plants you choose don't have any special maintenance needs, such as training, staking, pruning, or frequent replanting. Is it easily established but not invasive? Does it resist common pests and diseases so that you won't need to constantly spray it?

Plants are the healthiest and demand the least maintenance when they are grown in conditions hospitable to them, so plan and choose carefully, allowing your budget and local availability to play a role in the decision-making process.

Step 4: Take bite-size steps
I know you're excited about this, but don't attempt to tackle your whole yard at one time. Start by renovating only one bed. If you need to get rid of existing sod, you can rent a machine or remove it by hand using a knife or a sharp, flat-nosed spade. Roll up the sod and give it away or compost it. Then prepare the site by amending it according to the pH readings you received or took yourself, matching it to the needs of the new plants you've chosen. For example, my soil in

Concrete is shockingly alkaline; I amend it yearly with elemental sulfur to ease it toward a more acidic level.

Step 5: Choose and place your plants carefully

Inexperienced gardeners often place their main foundation plants too close together or too near a fence or a structure. (Two years ago a neighbor of mine ignored my shaking head and planted tree seedlings a foot away from his house's foundation.) Garden books and plant labels should indicate how large a perennial plant, grass, shrub or tree will grow. Pay attention to each plant's mature height and width; otherwise you'll end up with an overgrown bed in a few years' time, and you'll have to either prune the plants or move them farther apart. That is labor intensive, something you were trying to avoid. Plants also may subsequently die because of being uprooted several times—spoiling the look you were trying to create. When researching plants' sizes, err on the small side when making your final choices: Our mild, waterlogged climate often can coax some plants to grow larger than they normally would.

Another hint: Plants will always attempt to grow to their inherent height and width characteristics even after being pruned. The best time to avoid this mistake is in the planning stages, while you're putting everything on paper. You can always fill in the gaps with annuals, ground covers or wood chips until the permanent plants grow a bit.

Purchase only high-quality seedlings and plants. When purchasing trees and shrubs, large plants are not necessarily the best buy. Most of them have been grown plantation-style and are dug up and then put in containers. Not all growers are careful in digging up the plant and may have left the major portion of the root ball in the ground. The tree looks wonderful when purchased, but it may take several years for it to re-grow its root structure. A smaller plant may have a greater proportion of its root structure remaining and, therefore, suffer less from shock during transplanting; it should resume normal growth much sooner.

Finish that first bed, water it, enjoy the beauty of your labors for a few days while letting your back have a little rest. Then tackle the rest of your lawn and yard, knowing that a little up-front planning, research and careful plant choices should pay off with a lower-maintenance landscape and garden you'll enjoy for years.