

Small and Simple Is Key to Low-Maintenance Landscape



Photo by AlbertLandscaping.com: Keeping the landscape small and minimizing lawn areas reduces maintenance requirements.

Linda H. Yates is a Master Gardener volunteer with the University of Florida IFAS Extension of Leon County, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Thursday, July 9, 2009
Tallahassee Democrat

If flower gardening has always been an important part of your life, this pleasure does not have to end just because you are a busy professional or a senior citizen who would like to "age in place" rather than move to an assisted living facility.

Few professional couples are busier than the Rev. Wayne and Beth Curry. Last July he became senior minister of Trinity United Methodist Church. They left behind "church parsonage living" while he was pastor of several other churches in South and Central Florida and bought the first home of their own in Tallahassee.

"When I was growing up, I helped my mother plant a garden in Michigan, and now I wanted a garden of my own," Beth Curry said. Their new backyard was enclosed by a wood fence, had grass growing over mostly clay soil, one butterfly bush, and a crepe myrtle tree leaning over one end of the patio. He was busy getting to know some 2000 church members, preparing sermons, performing weddings and funerals and a multitude of other duties, and she was beginning to lead several exercise and fitness classes at the church.

When they had an hour or two Saturday mornings, they visited local nurseries and became familiar with flowers and shrubs they might use in their new garden. During other free moments, she was reading gardening books, or on the internet learning about soil improvement, low maintenance gardening, and proper landscape procedures.

By fall, the Currys' garden spot had been transformed. All the high-maintenance grass had been removed except for a four-foot path of it curving between new flower beds. The soil had been aerated and enriched with the addition of composted cow manure,

humus and topsoil. Water permeable landscape cloth covered the beds to stop weeds from growing, and a simple drip irrigation system was placed across the planting area.

The hard work was over and now the fun began. The Currys planted easy-to-grow Knock-Out roses, carefree salvias, agapanthus, canna lilies, black-eyed susans, a new elm tree to provide shade by the patio, a much admired angel trumpet (*Brugmansia* spp), a butterfly bush (*Buddleia*), and a Blue Glory vine (*Thunbergia battiscombei*). As these mature, fill the beds, and cover the fence, this professional couple brightens up empty spots with containers of already flowering plants. Other than pulling an occasional weed, planting seasonal annuals and cutting off spent flowers, when the Currys return home at the end of a busy day their garden becomes a healing place where they can relax on the patio or stroll down the path to see what new flower bloomed that day.

Keeping a garden small and simple and using environmentally sensitive practices, as the Currys have, is the solution for those who want to continue to enjoy gardening while busy with a career or other responsibilities.

For the senior citizen who chooses to continue living at home amid family memories and the sanctuary of a garden where every plant is like a friend, the solution to maintaining these during one's declining years is a different story. The value in doing so is more than sentimental.

Gardening is a great exercise that helps maintain bone density, keeps aging joints flexible and muscles strong. It is a pleasing activity that helps fill what may otherwise be lonely hours. It simply may be all the therapy you need. Seniors who want this can start by downsizing: Reduce the variety of plants in the garden, keeping only those that require little care, infrequent watering, little or no need for spraying for insects, fertilizing or pruning.

Get rid of the thugs in the garden—those plants that multiply by underground rhizomes or drop seeds that sprout up everywhere. Consider giving up high maintenance hybrid roses and replace them with lower maintenance old garden roses or the new Knock-Out varieties. Trade some of an oversized lawn for mulched areas where a few flowering shrubs may be planted.

If seniors have a disability that prevents bending over or walking, a raised narrow bed a foot or two above ground level will provide easy accessibility for planting flowers and vegetables. A wheelchair can move around the sides of it. Start these steps now and gardening can continue into old age.

###