

Low Maintenance Landscapes ¹

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Create your home landscape for leisurely enjoyment. Advance planning can result in an attractive and functional landscape that satisfies the needs of the entire family, yet requires minimum maintenance time and cost.

The ideal time to begin planning a low-maintenance landscape is when the lot is chosen and before the house is built. However, most homeowners don't have a choice; they have to begin landscaping after the house is finished or to work with an existing landscape. Even so, additions or changes in home landscapes can be planned so that every shrub, tree, and flower bed serves a definite purpose.

Establishing a Low Maintenance Landscape

SIZE. A small, well-kept garden is better than acres of weed growth. Many homeowners, especially in rural areas, try to maintain large lawn and garden areas. Reducing size is often the most straightforward and successful way to reduce landscape maintenance.

SIMPLICITY. Simplicity is the watchword for good design and low maintenance. Eliminate as

many frills such as bird baths, statues, and flower beds as possible. Instead of planting just for the sake of variety, let each plant serve a definite function. Although some homeowners achieve simplicity by overplanting and then eliminating the extras, this is costly and increases maintenance needs.

ARRANGEMENT. Arrange plants carefully. Scattered, cluttered plant groups need hand edging and weeding and complicate your mowing. Why not plant shrubs in masses? For example, an established dense shrub border needs little more than watering and pruning.

GRASS OR GROUND COVER? Avoid planting grass in areas that are too shady, too dry or wet, or too steep to be mowed safely. Use a ground cover and other plants better suited to these areas.

MULCHES. Use mulches around plants to minimize weeds and conserve moisture. Gravel, bark, or pine straw mulches require little care beyond pulling or spraying the weeds that grow through.

FERTILIZER. Do not over-fertilize. Plants kept at minimum fertilization levels need less pruning or mowing than highly-fertilized plants.

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TREE BEDS. A gravel bed or ground cover around trees eliminates trimming and speeds mowing. A ground cover also hides fallen blossoms, fruit, and leaves. Make beds wide enough so the person mowing doesn't run into low-hanging tree branches.

EDGING. Use metal or brick edging between the lawn and gravel walks or drives and around tree beds. This eliminates tedious trimming, keeps stones out of the lawn, and keeps grass from growing into walks and driveways. Edging makes an attractive border by defining the design more clearly.

PATHS. Where foot traffic is heavy, pave areas with concrete or spread compacted crushed stone or gravel. Make sure all access walks, paths, and gates are wide enough for lawn-maintenance equipment.

POWER TOOLS. Power equipment speeds your maintenance time. Be sure to provide a tool storage area easily available to your work areas. You can also store outdoor furniture and grills in the same facility.

FENCE OR HEDGE FOR PRIVACY. Consider hiding an unsightly view or gaining privacy with a wood fence or a hedge of low-maintenance shrubs. A well-built wood fence serves as a property divider, gives privacy, makes an excellent backdrop for shrubbery, and requires much less space than a planting of shrubs. A fence may take less care than plants, but you can select plants for a low-maintenance hedge.

VEGETABLE GARDENS. Before planting too many vegetables, consider your family's size. You can grow a lot of vegetables in a small space. Allow enough space between rows to permit easy cultivation and movement of a tiller. Power tilling saves hours of hand work weekly.

FLOWER BEDS. Narrow flower beds simplify weeding and spraying. Plants in the center are easier to reach. Use large masses of fewer varieties to get bold colors with less maintenance.

PRUNING. Prune trees so the wind can through them without causing damage. Prune lower limbs and thin branches to let more light reach the grass.

NATIVE PLANTS. Even with good planning, plants poorly suited to a site can ruin the landscape appearance. Consider using native plants. They are already adapted to local climate extremes (heat, cold, drought, or available sunlight) and soil characteristics (type and drainage). And they are less susceptible to pest problems.

LOW MAINTENANCE. Select plants that do not create excessive maintenance problems. For example, camellias and gardenias often require several sprayings to control disease. Other plants such as the plumbago may require much pruning. Slow-growing plants may cost more initially but will cost less for maintenance over the years.

QUALITY PLANTS. Plants come in many sizes, shapes, and qualities. Before you buy, evaluate a plant just as you would inspect a garment or appliance. A cheap plant is not necessarily an inexpensive one. Replanting or treating sickly plants takes time and money. To find quality, shop at reputable nurseries and garden centers that look neat and well cared for. Don't buy plants without seeing and inspecting them first.

QUALITY GRADES. If they are available, select plants tagged according to the grades and standards set by the Florida Division of Plant Industry. Plants graded as Florida Fancy or No. 1 should be exceptionally healthy and vigorous. Don't settle for anything less than a No. 1 plant, if possible. The plant of poor quality at the beginning may also be of poor quality at maturity.

HOW TO SELECT PLANTS. If the plants in a nursery or garden center are not tagged by grade, inspect them yourself. Downgrade any plant with excessive new tender growth or with weak, poorly formed, scarred, cracked, and peeling trunks or branches. Look for a compact plant: poorly distributed branches often develop into less desirable "leggy" plants. Avoid plants with leaves of improper shape, size, or color such as yellowing. Examine leaves for insect, disease, or mechanical damage. Examine container-grown plants for a root system that is well established but not growing out of the container. Plants with roots outside the container will be damaged when ripped from the ground to be sold.

GOOD PLANTING PRACTICES. Nothing substitutes for good planting practices. Take time to select the proper planting site and to prepare the hole for planting. Proper pruning, watering, and fertilizing are part of this step.

PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE. Anticipate problems before they occur. A preventive maintenance program decreases maintenance time.

Step-by-step Home Grounds Improvement

You can develop and improve your Florida home landscape over several years. Suggested steps to follow are given below.

First Year

MAKE A PLAN FOR THE ENTIRE HOME GROUNDS. Put all ideas for landscape improvement on paper so that all elements involved in improving and developing the grounds can be seen in relation to one another. With the help of each family member, prepare a list of all family needs and activities. Try to include the landscape goals or final appearance you are working toward.

Next make a map or diagram of existing features to be considered in developing and improving the grounds. Show locations of borders, buildings, trees, roads, walks, plant beds, and shaded areas. Note good and bad features that will influence improvement. Do not plan more features than your lot can conveniently hold.

The location of your front yard is usually set already by custom and use. You may want, however, to redefine or adapt the space as a better setting for your home.

Locate the service section close to the kitchen and garage. Use only a minimum space for this work area.

The private area or outdoor-living area will be used most. If your family enjoys outdoor activities, reserve a large portion of the lot for recreation. Remember also that family needs may change.

CLEAN UP. Remove debris, old flower beds, and other unsightly material. Prune dead and diseased branches and overgrowth from shrubs and trees.

CLEAN UP THE ROADSIDE OR STREET bordering your property. Remove stumps, fallen trees, debris, signs, old fences and buildings, or any other materials that make an unsightly appearance.

BUILD WALKS AND DRIVES. Straight walks and drives make mowing easier. Keep the grass border trimmed straight along the edges. Walkways that are flush with the ground with no edging material are easier to maintain than those with flower borders or other low edging plants.

START WITH THE LAWN. The lawn is one of the most important landscape features. Start it early. If you cannot do the entire lawn at one time, start the front lawn first. Using sod to establish a new lawn is quicker than seeding or sprigging, but it is also more expensive. Check Extension bulletins and fact sheets for information on grasses and planting methods.

PURCHASE PLANTS. First purchase slow-growing plants and those needed to establish foundation plantings around the front of the house.

START A DEFINITE MAINTENANCE PROGRAM. Proper fertilizing, pruning, mulching, and caring for ornamental plants is very important from the beginning.

REPAIR AND PAINT the house, fence, and other buildings visible from the front.

Second Year

CHECK FIRST YEAR'S LIST. Continue and complete any work listed for the first year that you have not yet completed.

REEXAMINE YOUR LANDSCAPE PLAN. Make any changes that seem necessary, based on the first year's experience.

PLANT TREES. Trees, like lawns, are major landscape features and should be started early in home grounds development. Plant trees to form a foreground and background for the house.

CONTINUE SHRUB PLANTINGS. Complete base or foundation plantings, then establish the plants most necessary for privacy.

REMOVE ISOLATED SHRUBS from lawns and use elsewhere, if possible.

CONTINUE THE CLEAN-UP PROGRAM.

CONTINUE THE MAINTENANCE PROGRAM.

Third Year

CHECK THE FIRST AND SECOND YEARS' WORK. Complete any items left undone.

REEXAMINE THE LANDSCAPE PLAN. Make any changes that seem necessary after the first and second years' work.

COMPLETE SHRUB AND TREE PLANTINGS.

CONTINUE REPAIR AND PAINTING of house, buildings, and fences.

By using the above suggestions, you can create a low maintenance landscape. Never confuse low maintenance with no maintenance, however. Weeding, watering, fertilizing, pruning, and mulching are necessary for an attractive landscape. Plan a good program for home grounds development, carry it out on your own schedule, maintain what you've accomplished, and you'll have a landscape to enjoy.