

Maintenance – how low is low?

Gardening can be a balancing act between your desired looks and the time you are able to spend on maintenance. So how do you get impressive results without devoting your whole life to your garden?

WORDS ANNIE GUILFOYLE



Annie Guilfoyle is Director of Garden Design at KLC School of Design. She is also Garden Course Coordinator at West Dean College and runs her own garden design studio. "My clients and their gardens are very diverse. Ranging from tiny urban courtyards to large rural estates, they offer a wide variety of challenges. There is something to learn and discover on every project."

Let's start by correcting a common misconception: there is a difference between low maintenance and no maintenance. As part of a design brief, clients will generally ask for a low maintenance garden – never yet have I been asked to design a high maintenance garden! But how low is low? In truth, what they are imagining is probably little or no maintenance at all, but unless you want a garden that is completely devoid of plant life there is always going to be some level of care required. To avoid creating a garden that may veer out of control, it's worth spending the time to work out exactly what type of maintenance is going to be necessary and what you are able to cope with, both in terms of your time and knowledge.

Here are some considerations to help you understand the level of maintenance that your garden may need and ideas for ways to keep it to a manageable level. Think about the location of the garden and the soil conditions – for example, a heavy clay soil may require considerable work, especially in the early stages of preparing a site for planting, whereas a poor sandy soil is likely to need more feeding and watering once the garden is established. If your garden is very exposed, hedges may be high on your list of requirements. However they are likely to need trimming at least once and maybe twice a year, depending on your chosen plants. Reducing the amount of deciduous planting and increasing the percentage of evergreen may seem like a good idea in order to avoid excessive leaf fall in autumn – but remember that all plants including evergreens have to shed leaves

at some point. With evergreens you will have some leaf drop throughout the year, instead of just in the autumn.

Some may think that increasing the lawn area will reduce the amount of work, but this is not necessarily the case. Keeping a lawn looking good, especially if the garden is shady or the drainage is bad, can be quite labour intensive, whereas planting the area with suitable ground cover would mean a lot less fuss.

Plant list

While you are still at the planning stage, make a list of all the existing plants and remove the ones that are going to create too much work, for example a shrub such as *Symphoricarpos albus*, which if given time will slowly dominate the garden. It is tempting to select trees and shrubs that establish quickly without giving much thought to their eventual height and spread. The wrong choice could mean you having to prune them back regularly. You will need to take the local climate into consideration, as this will affect plant growth and performance. In a sheltered garden in the south of the country the plants will have a different growth rate to those in a more exposed site in the north.

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1 Balancing act

With a client who is a 'plantaholic' but also has a very demanding job, I needed to design a garden that was easy for her to manage but still satisfied her love of plants. A balance between the area for planting and lawn was important.



2 Cutting time

Hedges and topiary can add valuable interest and structure to a garden but they also require a lot of maintenance to keep them looking good. At Bury Court in Hampshire this *Buxus* hedge has to be trimmed regularly to keep the intricate shape.

3 One cut

Grasses can be relatively low maintenance in the garden and for many, simply cutting back the dead stems in spring is all you will need to do to keep them growing well.

4 Avoid spreaders

Phalaris arundinacea var. *picta* 'Picta' is such a lovely looking grass but it can take over if you let it. So do your homework and make sure that you avoid the plants that spread too vigorously – or you may regret planting them.

5 Well behaved

There are certain shrubs such as *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl' that I regularly use when clients ask for a low-maintenance garden. I know that they are not going to misbehave and grow too large or too quickly.

6 Autumn leaves

Raking leaves can be an annual task that many people dread, despite the fact that the leaves can be turned into very useful leaf mould. Consider the amount of evergreen and deciduous plants that you want in the garden and try to strike a balance.



ZANNIE GUILFYLE: 3&5; MARIANNE MAJERUS: 4&6; CLIVE NICHOLS



Plant suggestions

Here is a list of 'well-behaved' plants that I use regularly.

Shrubs

- *Abelia x grandiflora* AGM*
- *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl' AGM
- *Cotoneaster lacteus* AGM
- *Itea ilicifolia* AGM
- *Nandina domestica* AGM
- *Olearia macrodonta* AGM
- *Sarcococca confusa* AGM
- *Syringa microphylla* 'Superba' AGM

Perennials and grasses

- *Astrantia major* (does self-seed but worth it!)
- *Ballota pseudodictamnus* AGM
- *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'
- *Carex buchananii* AGM
- *Epimedium x perralchicum* 'Fröhnleiten'
- *Heuchera* cultivars
- *Liriope muscari* AGM
- *Phlox paniculata* 'David'
- *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht' AGM

Bulbs

- *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' AGM
- *Narcissus* 'Petrel'
- *Nectaroscordum siculum*

Great ground cover

- *Ajuga reptans* Black Scallop = 'Binblasca'
- *Asarum europaeum* AGM
- *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold' AGM
- *Euonymus fortunei* 'Silver Queen'
- *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'White Ness' AGM
- *Luzula sylvatica*
- *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' AGM
- *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Smoky Blue'
- *Trachystemon orientalis*
- *Vinca difformis* AGM

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7 High stakes

Delphinium spires add mid-summer drama and height to a border but frequently need staking as they are inclined to grow across their neighbours in a very unsociable manner. Tying in and staking perennials can be very time consuming.



8 Planted pots

Containers are very popular, especially on roofs and balconies, but remember they will require watering on a daily basis in the summer months. These tall pots have been planted with succulents, which can withstand a certain degree of neglect.



9 Rampant climbers

Some climbers such as Rosa 'Champney's Pink Cluster' and *Lonicera periclymenum* 'Belgica' are vigorous and require a sturdy structure to scramble over. If they are not pruned correctly, they can become extremely heavy and cumbersome.



10 Best behaviour

Nandina domestica is a handsome evergreen shrub that offers interest all year round with flowers in summer and berries that last well into winter, and best of all it will not outgrow its welcome.



11 Water wise

One way of reducing maintenance is to install an irrigation system, especially if you are away for long periods in the summer. Simple systems can be set up on an automatic timer.



7 ANDREW LAWSON/MAGB; 8 JOLIANNE MAJERUS; 9 CLIVE NICHOLS; 10 PEPY/GARY KSMITH; 11 THE GARDEN COLLECTION

“Who is going to look after your garden? Think carefully about the amount of time you can devote to gardening and your level of expertise”

▷ Weeds are often the cause of much concern when it comes to maintenance, so it is worth checking your garden for any evidence of invasive weeds such as ground elder or bindweed. Preventing weed growth is the best way to avoid problems and mulching the beds between the plants or using ground cover is the most effective approach. However, weeds can still manage to establish themselves, so regular inspection and removal will be needed during the growing season before they have the opportunity to set seed.

You may wish to avoid perennials that require staking and trying-in, such as delphiniums; if not supported at the right time they can grow away at rather jaunty angles, flattening their neighbours. Find out if the plants that you would like to use are prone to any particular pests and diseases, as monitoring for potential problems, removing pests and spraying can be quite time consuming.

Beware thugs

Steer clear of plants that are described as ‘thugs’ or ‘invasive’ – these are best placed in large gardens, and are for those with the time to keep them in check. Many herbaceous perennials and deciduous grasses will at the very least require cutting back in winter or early spring as the new growth emerges. Some perennials such as heleniums benefit from regular deadheading helping to prolong the flowering period well into late autumn, so it may be best to focus on plants that flower for long periods without the need to remove the spent flowers.

Climbers are the perfect plants for adding vertical interest but some might require a substantial annual prune. A good example is the wonderfully scented honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum belgica* – as each year’s growth piles on top of the previous one, it can eventually become weighty enough to pull down a fence. Climbing and rambling roses are very popular but unless they are properly pruned each year they can become unruly – the same of course applies to wisterias. Look for climbers that are not too vigorous such as *Clematis* ‘Betty Corning’, which are easier to manage.

Who is going to look after your garden? Think carefully about the amount of time you can devote to gardening and your level of expertise. Consider employing a gardener either weekly, monthly or once a season to help with larger tasks. Another option could be to find a company that will come in and train you to take care of your garden under their guidance. Bringing in a gardener is not an admission of defeat; we have some of the finest horticultural training establishments in the world, producing first-rate professional gardeners. If you do want to have the more demanding plants in your garden then consider doing courses on general garden management or more specialised techniques such as pruning. That way you don’t have to deny yourself those wonderful needy plants that require more time and expertise. You never know, you may decide that maintaining your garden is more fun and cheaper than the annual membership for the gym. □
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Books for further reading

- *50 High-Impact, Low-Care Garden Plants* by Tracy DiSabato-Aust, Timber Press, £9.99
- *Care-free Plants Reader’s Digest*, £14.99
- *Gardener’s Essential Plant Guide* by Brian Davis, Silverdale. Out of print but one of the best books for understanding trees, shrubs and climbers – including details on growth rate and maintenance.
- *Low Maintenance Gardening* by Andi Clevely, Frances Lincoln, £9.99
- *Low Maintenance Gardens* by Caroline Tilston, Wiley, £9.99
- *The No-work Garden* by Bob Flowerdew, Kyle Cathie, (out of print but second-hand copies may be available).

Courses

- Try your local botanical gardens for course details.
- The **RHS** hold courses at all their gardens: Wisley, Harlow Carr, Rosemoor and Hyde Hall. Go to www.rhs.org.uk/Courses/Leisure-learning
- For a list of relevant courses go to www.gardensillustrated.com/article/practical/courses-gardeners