



TAKING IT EASY

To look good, a garden doesn't have to take up every weekend in mowing and maintenance

Words: Jacki Brown

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Most people are so busy with long hours at work, study, chores and looking after kids — plus trying to keep up a social life on top of it all — the outdoor areas of the home are easy to neglect.

Between sports and social events, not a lot of time is spent outside, especially during the week and even on weekends. As a result, modern landscapes for busy people need to be easy to look after and need to be able to cope with some degree of neglect. So planning and designing are vital for a low-maintenance landscape because you don't want to spend more time down the track redesigning or replacing what didn't work out the first time.

Landscape maintenance tasks

Effectively creating a low-maintenance garden involves whittling down the amount of unpleasant and time-consuming tasks so that the quicker and more enjoyable tasks remain. With good planning and design, these common landscape maintenance chores can be reduced by doing the following:

Watering:

- Select drought-tolerant plants.
- Create cool, moist microclimates using pergolas, shade houses and canopy trees.
- Use self-watering pots filled with premium

potting mix containing wetting agent.

- Put irrigation systems on a timer.
- Place plants in locations suited to their growing requirements.
- Use a wetting agent on top of the soil at the time of planting.

Fertilising:

- Select native or exotic plants which are suited to the site.
- Employ the permaculture approach and keep chickens to add nutrients to the soil.
- Include self-mulching garden beds, where trees and larger shrubs drop their leaves which compost down and enrich the soil.
- Mulch all garden beds and bare soil to encourage micro-organisms which improve soil and plant health.

Weeding:

- The best defence against weeds is to keep garden plants healthy and to start with enough plants to fill out the beds so the plants out-compete the weeds.
- Drastic measures might be needed when redesigning a constantly recurring weedy spot. Change the drainage or shading if possible to suit the requirements of the landscape plants more than the weeds; replace garden soil; or consider a paved

area or other feature instead of garden beds. It's worth getting advice or practical help from a horticulturist when attempting to remove large areas of weeds as they can tell you the best way to remove the weeds for good.



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Pruning:

- Choose compact plant varieties and plants with very consistent mature sizes which won't unexpectedly grow too big for their britches.
- Don't plant trees under or next to structures or services (especially power lines) if their mature size will cause interference.
- Where you want a raised canopy — for example, near a driveway or over a sitting area — choose plants with a natural habit of being upright with few branches near the ground rather than vase-shaped trees which produce shoots from the base.

Cleaning:

- Place features such as pools and paving away from trees to avoid leaf litter.
- In areas prone to staining, use dark-coloured paving as it is more forgiving.

1. Reducing the amount of lawn you have and mulching paths and garden beds reduces mowing and weeding.

2. You can replace areas of difficult-to-grow lawn with hardy groundcover plants such as Ajuga 'Chocolate Chip'.

3. Use drought-tolerant plants such as Flower Carpet Roses which need much less water and less upkeep.

- Avoid small pebbles where they will collect leaves, dirt, gum nuts, seed pods and weeds.

Low-maintenance plants

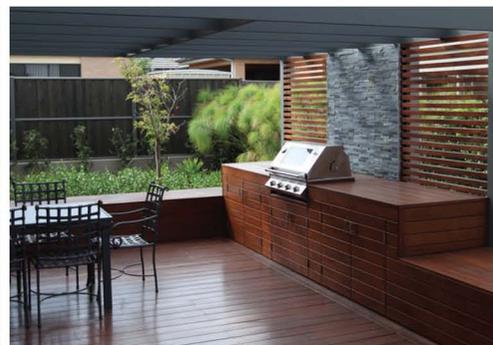
If you only enlist horticultural advice for one thing, it should be plant selection, because plant selection needs to consist of more than rushing into a garden centre and picking out an array of plants that look good on the shelves.

Use plants which are suited to the local climate (temperature and rainfall) as well as microclimates (aspect, shade, position in the landscape). Have a look around your neighbourhood and see which plants are thriving.

More plants mean less work and less weeds as well as improved microclimate and water retention. Include layers of planting (groundcovers, shrubs, trees) to out-compete weeds. Shade trees reduce evaporation of water from the soil and plants' leaves.

Some trusty favourites include liriopie, clivea and mondo grass for dry shady spots, bromeliads, ctenanthe and crotons in moist shade and, for hot sunny spots, lomandra, native grasses and bird of paradise. Group plants together by the growing conditions they require to reduce upkeep. ■

This article was prepared by Jacki Brown and the team at ecodesign on behalf of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers (AILDM). If you would like to find an AILDM member in your area, visit the website: www.aildm.com.au



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