

But is it really low-maintenance?

Before leaving for [Baja](#) last week I was hard at work setting up drip lines for potted tomatoes, peppers, herbs, and native perennials. Cautiously - because this is a sensitive subject - my husband mentioned that my gardening is a lot of work. Well it isn't work to me but when I give talks I "sell" native gardening as being low-maintenance. True, most of the work I was doing was not for native plants, but rather for garden edibles and both native and non-native container plants. Still, each time that I bend down to trim, pick and water on the way to and from the car, I do it without a thought. In fact it is play for me, but in honesty, it does take time.

With this in mind I would like to suggest ways to reduce the amount of time spent working - or playing - in the garden. I must be clear that I am not suggesting that I will actually do any of this. It is hopeless for me. I cannot stop. Furthermore, I will not keep track of the amount of time I spend gardening because it is impossible to count all of the little things I do coming and going. But more importantly, keeping track of time defeats the purpose of gardening. For me, gardening supersedes time. It disconnects me from the clock, and it is often only the change in sunlight that reminds me that I have other things to do. But I digress. For those who wish to enjoy their yards without communing with each and every plant, here are a few thoughts on creating a low-maintenance, native plant garden.

Although lawn-dominated yards seem to require little work, they are not actually low-maintenance. True, it feels easy if you can have someone else do the work, but these landscapes require constant, ongoing inputs. Unlike native plants, they are not adapted to our climate, and need supplemental water year around. The type of work required – primarily watering, mowing and edging - is fairly uniform throughout the year. In fact, judging by the number of sprinklers I see watering in the rain, there is little consideration given to daily or seasonal changes at all. You can reduce the resources and work needed to keep your yard beautiful by replacing lawn with appropriate native plants. Although care for native plant gardens changes with the seasons and the weather, once you are familiar with their needs, these plants can easily be the foundation of a very low-maintenance and pleasing garden.

Select plants and a garden design that mimics pre-disturbance vegetation. After all, undisturbed coastal sage scrub, for example, looks wonderful with no help from humans. My home is located in a community with street names like Oak Knoll, Oak Street, Oaklawn, Oakwood, Oak Meadow and Oak Crest. This and the spontaneous appearance of oak seedlings have led me to conclude that my garden should be an oak woodland. A mature oak that grew from a volunteer acorn is the focal point of the garden. Leaf litter is allowed to accumulate beneath this and other trees, providing ideal conditions for them and the least amount of work for me.

Oak woodland garden in backyard requires almost no maintenance at all.

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Disturbing soil, whether raking, hoeing or even weeding, encourages more weeds. This is one reason why new gardens require so much work. Clearly there is no alternative to disturbance when replacing a lawn with a native garden, but as the garden settles in and matures, try not to disturb the soil unnecessarily. Remove weeds gently and do not break up or rake the surface. Placing several inches of mulch on top of the soil can be helpful. Nature should guide you when selecting the type of mulch. Use inorganic material, such as decomposed granite or pea gravel, for desert and scrub gardens. Organic mulch, including leaf litter and bark, adds warmth and softness to a woodland garden, while creating soil conditions consistent with the needs of the plants.

When I think about what takes the most time in my garden I am forced to suggest that lazy gardeners should avoid annuals. This is difficult to suggest because each spring my wildflower display provides me with enormous pleasure. In nature, the exuberance of the wildflower season varies with the year depending on the amount and distribution of rainfall. In our gardens, we must water tender seedlings if the winter is dry or accept the fact that some years few will reach maturity. Weeding as the seedlings emerge is tedious but necessary. And finally, once the wildflowers finish blooming and go to seed, they look a bit messy and many gardeners will want to remove them. A lawn mower or weed whip can help with this, but in small spaces one might have to hand pull the spent plants.

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Globe gilia (*Gilia capitata*) seed heads give garden a wild, rusty look that is not appreciated by all.



But everyone, and especially Milo, enjoys the beauty and excitement of the wildflower display.

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My next suggestion for keeping the work load down is to limit the number of container plants. If you are like me then you just cannot avoid potting up a few cuttings or bulbs. These plants will require observation and care. They are not impressed when you want to go away for a week in July, leaving them to survive triple digit temperatures in their small island of soil. Cacti and some succulents are low maintenance, even in containers, but most other perennials need daily attention. I have had quite a bit of success with temporary drip lines, though I only use these automated systems when I am away since water needs are different for each container plant. Those who do not wish to be tied to their gardens, especially in the summer, should limit the number of container plants they must tend.

Containers of monkeyflowers (*Mimulus aurantiacus*) and other perennials receive water every other day through an automated drip system. (See [Summer Vacation](#) for more on drip.)

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Public side of pots.

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These are just a few considerations on creating a low-maintenance garden. I'd love to hear some of your ideas on how to reduce time spent playing in the dirt, even from those who always have dirt beneath their nails.

Milo relaxing under the oak.

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