

Landscape Maintenance

By Sean James

With proper care, a landscape can last for hundreds of years. The subtle pruning that helps a garden endure is the best start to keeping a landscape in good shape.

Shearing shrubs, with the exception of hedges and topiary, should generally be avoided since most shrubs cannot tolerate it. They will slowly die and need expensive replacement, reducing property value. When shearing hedges, make sure the bottom is wider than the top so that light can reach the whole side of the plant, keeping it thick at the bottom. Don't feel you need to let the hedge get bigger every year. Once it reaches the desired height and shape, keep it there.

To avoid expensive replanting, choose plants that will mature to the right size in the first place. Be patient. They'll grow into their natural size and form. Even so, every few years, plantings may need to be rejuvenated. The common practice of cutting shrubs back by half is not advisable since that will weaken them each time it's done. The better option takes a bit of courage.

Coppicing shrubs, cutting them all the way to the ground, as often as every three to five years will keep them fresh and hardy. Coppicing seems scary but works well. The list of shrubs that can be cut to the ground includes shrub roses, Spirea, Ninebark, Mock Orange, Blue Mist Spirea and Barberry. It's best done in early spring and the plants will begin to regrow in about six weeks. It can be carried out on most deciduous, multi-stem shrubs that are not variegated (with multiple colours, usually white and green). Fall pruning



▲ Instead of removing overgrown shrubs, or cutting them back by half, cutting multi-stem deciduous shrubs right to the ground will rejuvenate them beautifully. PHOTO BY SEAN JAMES

retards vigour and spring pruning promotes vigour.

The alternative to coppicing overgrown shrubs is to prune them up and over the landscape. Arch-pruning can create a magical area where visitors walk beneath flowering shrubs, almost being embraced by the garden. Excellent candidates include Forsythia, Black Lace Elder, Rose of Sharon and many Viburnums. Fighting a plant's nature is always difficult and eventually ends in deformation and death.

Dividing Perennials

Next steps to consider are perennial interaction and aging. Gardening is best thought of as refereeing — keeping the thugs from taking over the garden and making sure the little, delicate plants get their share of sunlight. If a perennial is overwhelming its neighbour, it can be lifted and divided with the extra plants being used elsewhere or given away. Perennials don't like to be moved but they DO like to be divided. Don't move them without dividing them. Sometimes plants will show

you they're ready for division. Signs that it's time include floppiness, dying out in the centre, unusual susceptibility to disease and reduced flowering. Some perennials, such as Peony and Gas Plant, will grow for centuries without needing division. Species such as Siberian Iris (and most others) benefit from division every five years or so.

Pruning and Mulching

Spending money on proper tree pruning keeps trees alive and healthy, letting light and wind through the canopy. This benefits the garden as well, letting rain and light through to the ground. Since proper pruning removes weak branches, it ensures that the tree will shelter the house safely for decades/centuries. The tree will continue to add value to the property, from \$5,000 to \$40,000.

As plants grow, live and fade, consider replacing them with native plants that attract birds, so that the birds will control pests. Another way to fend off pests and diseases is to keep plants healthy. Mulch

every year with composted pine mulch, or even just compost. Don't heap mulch against the trunks of trees! Slope it down to where the trunk meets the soil. This puts depleted nutrients back into the soil and improves soil structure. Mulching leaves into the garden is another way to recycle nutrients and far better and easier than bagging things up for the Town to take away. Let Mother Nature do what she does best.

Many folks think gardening is a lot of work. Remember, gardening is an escape from our crazy world, not a burden. The actual act of working the soil causes the release of happy hormones such as serotonin. Sitting in the corner of the garden, peacefully enjoying the fruits, both figuratively and literally, is one of the best ways to nurture the spirit. Think on this as your properly maintained garden lives and grows from day to day, year to year... generation to generation. **NEV**

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