

## Gardening While Old

Let's define the terms before we have this conversation. "Gardening" is the application of time, muscle, and money to your home grounds for the purpose of providing joy, exercise, and real estate property enhancement. You are "old" when 75% of your contemporaries garden on the window sills of their assisted living facilities.

Passionate gardening without guilt is enjoyed by the old only when they readjust their standards of perfection. Lawns, for example, do not need to look fine enough to pass inspection at the Master's tournament. Take off your bifocals and if your lawn appears to be smoothly green, it passes. The alternative is a lawn service that will use the funds you have set aside for a cruise. This may be just as well: most men, I expect, would rather admire green grass than blue sea when the blue sea means dressing for dinner.

The square footage of lawn should be in inverse proportion to the age of the gardener. In place of sweeping lawn have deep borders composed of trees and shrubs. By choosing small flowering trees such as dogwoods, shadblow, fringe tree, vitex, and redbud as well as shrubs such as azalea, witch hazel and weigela, you have year around color and interest with very little effort. Smaller evergreens, well mulched, can bridge the space between shrubs and lawn. The use of ground covers that return without being coaxed make gardening easier. Pachysandra, epimedium, and ajuga serve in shady spots and creeping phlox and herbs like thyme blanket dry sunny places where grass is reluctant to grow.

None of these plants require a lot of care. If you have been taking moderately good care of your soil, it is fertile enough for trees and shrubs and simple ground covers. When these plants are established they do not require additional fertilizer. In fact, overfeeding results in lush growth that is prone to winter or storm damage.

If your landscape has a sunny spot for a vegetable garden, use raised beds. Hard to imagine, but just a foot off the ground makes planting and harvesting half the effort! For those of us who failed carpentry 101 there are kits that go together as easily as Lincoln logs. They are costly but dining on that superb produce will guarantee you will be gardening long enough for the vegetables to balance the cost.

Some chores are inevitable. If you have had the foresight to install drip irrigation, congratulations! It is prudent and effective. Walking may be healthy but lugging that hose can trip you up and waste water. Fill the watering can half full and slowly water only those newly planted treasures. Your older shrubs will outlive you anyway just by taking their chances with what nature provides.

It is a good idea to carry a stout stick for balance. I noticed I was hauling my heavy spade with me, using it as a prop, so I acknowledged the need for the branch-converted-to-stick my son made for hiking uneven trails years ago. Actually, leaning on

a stick gives you more purchase with the other arm. If you are reluctant to be seen using a cane or stick, remember that we elders become invisible with age.

Perhaps you have been dumped unceremoniously by a lightweight folding chair or stackable plastic chair? Senior gardeners merit a safe and sturdy perch while they admire past efforts and plan future endeavors. Treat yourself!

Mulching is the key to preventing weeds and loss of moisture. I don't have a place to have a large load deposited so I buy it in small, two square foot bags. Larger bags are less expensive but a bad back is costly. You make the judgment call. Usually I decant the mulch into a pail, helpful in scattering it exactly where it is needed.

I have spent a lot of time trying to simplify my planting without great success. As plants die, I heave out the remains and let their neighbors fill the gap. Because I find diversity refreshing, I don't have the numbers of one species that would make a garden both more stylish and easier to manage. I do let plants like the black-eyed Susan spread at will since weeds don't make a dent when that Rudbeckia shoulders them out.

Much as I love roses, I am content with a few old shrub roses and new disease-resistant ones, leaving the glorious hybrid teas for the young with more patience and skill. One fragrant bloom in a small vase cheers me; I truly don't need dozens. Generally, I leave the flowers outside as an excuse to visit them. Perhaps the old are like the very young, easily delighted by the interplay of light and color in the blessed out of doors.