

HAVE FUN IN YOUR GARDEN THIS SUMMER

THE NEW LOW-MAINTENANCE GARDEN HELPS MINIMIZE THE WORK

Written By Robyn Rochm Cannon



Anyone who has ever owned a beautiful garden knows that it doesn't come without a big price—and I'm not talking about a monetary commitment. Of course, there's certainly that; the plants and everything required to support this wonderful hobby are expensive, and getting more so, it seems.

The commitment I'm referring to has to do with time—or, more to the point, the lack of it—to just sit down, read a book, or put your feet up in the garden because endless chores await the doing. Added to myriad other obligations in our lives, we can easily become prisoners of our own creations. Who knew when you planted all those blowsy English perennials that a future of indentured servitude was in store?

But there's hope for us all in the form of a new book by Valerie Easton, a Seattle newspaper columnist and author, who has tackled the subject of less work and more play in the garden space. *The NEW Low-Maintenance Garden: How to Have a Beautiful, Productive Garden and the Time to Enjoy It* (Timber Press, 2009) is based on decades of her own gardening experiences.

"For many years, my enthusiasm for digging, planting, and caring for all I'd created was boundless," Easton says. "And then one day it wasn't." When Easton's husband of thirty years resigned as her "yard boy," she knew she had to make some changes in her own high-maintenance landscape or become resigned to caring for "thousands of plants" totally on her own.

"As middle-age crises go, it wasn't too bad," she now says. "He simply told me again and again until I heard him that he was going to spend his weekends bike riding and kayaking rather than hauling buckets of mulch up the stairs, mucking out the pond, and carting away excess biomass." About the time she was rethinking her own situation, Easton was hearing similar stories from other gardeners. But it wasn't just the "longtime, plant-besotted gardeners, the ones with the 'tired backs,'" Easton says. "New generations of gardeners don't have the time to spend to devoting their weekends to yard work," she says. While younger gardeners may appreciate a pretty garden or wish to harvest salads or herbs for dinner, social and family obligations require gardening to fit into a more balanced lifestyle.

Great gardens today revolve around the concept of "creating outdoor spaces for dining, play, relaxation, and entertaining," comments Easton. The time for "garden as a sanctuary—as an antidote to the stresses and strains of the world"—has come.

Accompanied by colorful photographs of beautiful private spaces by Jacqueline M. Koch, Easton's text examines just how to achieve such a garden that "doesn't awaken dread at the thought of caring for it."

She admits that the words "low maintenance" don't exactly conjure up the "lush, sensual, productive gardens most of us long for." But these gardens are not simply thrown together, nor are they filled with beauty bark or excessive use of pesticides. "The hours of toil and tasks may be left out of the recipe, and the exhaustion is taken out—but not the fulfillment," she assures readers.

Easton has many lessons to share. She divides chapters into discussions of how to design and efficiently work in your garden, take advantage of the seasons, create an edible garden and carefree containers, and edit your plant palette.

Here are a few key messages for how to make your own garden low maintenance:

- Good design comes first. Plants are the embellishment, not the structure, of the garden. Use the best, longest-lasting materials available for hardscape.
- Keep your garden space compact.
- Edit plant choices by a color scheme you love. Easton chose her favorite four: butter yellow, chartreuse, plum, and orange.
- Play out those same colors in the hardscape. Easton had an artist create stepping stones in that palette.
- Water is a lovely addition, but choose a fountain rather than a pond.
- Improve every inch of soil with compost so plants thrive with less care.
- Take advantage of vertical space and plant up; screens create beautiful architecture and privacy.
- Get rid of your lawn and use succulents liberally for their low-water tapestry effect.
- Keep it simple; don't clutter your garden with too many small ornaments. Make it a lesson in restraint.
- Put plants where they want to grow.
- Choose double-duty plants. Artichokes add height and structure, while violas and calendulas brighten the landscape, the vase, and the salad bowl.

There's more great advice and inspiration for new and experienced gardeners here in Easton's book. I think I'll start by going into the garden and reading! ■