

Book Review

The New Low Maintenance Garden: How to Have a Beautiful, Productive Garden and the Time to Enjoy It

Valerie Easton

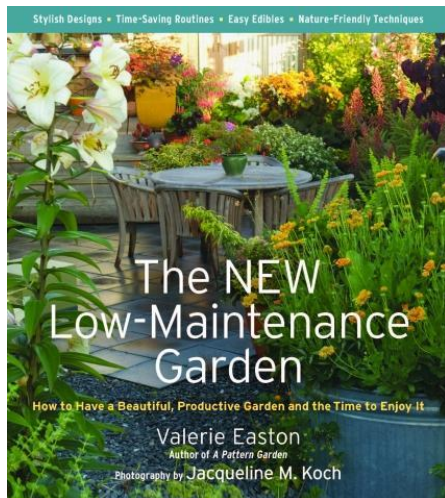
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Although she loved gardening as much as ever, Valerie Easton had reached a time in her life when she realized she no longer had time or physical stamina to manage a typical garden. Her experience writing a weekly garden column for *The Seattle Times* affirmed she was not alone in this dilemma. The opportunity to move to a home with a smaller area for gardening resulted in an experiment that led her to define and edit her choices, which produced a beautiful and rewarding garden that did not sap time or energy. Her book includes information about various low maintenance gardens and chapters that end with a “Resources” section of books, lists and websites. For me, the Resources sections at the ends of each chapter were especially interesting.



What separates a modern garden from others is not its style or contents, but its design born of its specific location and its richness in native plants that can nurture and protect the wildlife it attracts. With thoughtful choices and decisive editing, the modern low-maintenance garden contains a minimum of lawn; little dividing or pruning; no spraying, staking or topiary, since plants are chosen that can grow into their own natural shape and size. The functions of the garden determine the hardscape, the overall design, and the inclusion of specific plants. Whether for relaxing, dining, attracting wildlife, providing food or flowers to arrange, plants and materials are selected to meet a limited color scheme or specific purpose. Vertical growing spaces and raised boxes or large containers present conditions for growing a larger variety of plants in less space. Attention to amending soil to obtain optimum growing conditions eliminates frequent fertilizing; drip irrigation minimizes watering.

After defining what a low maintenance garden is and is not, Easton takes us to the homes of 8 gardeners who live in locations as varied as a high rise apartment to West Coast hilly to dry desert oasis to foliage clad courtyard to East Coast historic to a deck garden. The photos and interviews give credence to the mantra of creating a design before selecting plants, to be guided by the geometry created through hardscape and accessories, to invest in infrastructure, and above all, to edit down to the objects and plants you love most. Each gardener shared a love of outside spaces and infused the garden with personality, but used restraint and repetition to lighten the work load. The book list in “Resources” is extensive and includes comments on each selection. The online reference at www.gardendesignonline.com lists more books, gardens and notes on what is going on in gardening worldwide.

After inspiring her readers with gardens, Easton begins to explain how it all works. Most of the information repeats the basic principles taught to Extension Master Gardeners, which emphasizes soil preparation and selecting the right plant for the right spot. Beyond the basics of horticulture, however, the author addresses the importance of simplicity, of editing and of creating a design with repetition, and of limiting the variety of plant material. Alternatives to lawn include the eco lawn, ground covers and mulches. Each alternative is evaluated for its advantages and challenges with recommendations for specific plants and types of mulch. A raised bed primer deals with materials as well as design. The “Resources” section directs readers to contact their local Extension Master Gardener organization for help making the best choices for their particular area. Seven online resources are included.

In the quest for low-maintenance, it is smart to look at the rhythms of nature and to practice gardening for sustainability and limited impact to the environment. Being in partnership with Mother Nature, we enjoy a more independent garden and less work. Many gardeners rush to create a new garden, but would be wiser to patiently observe the potential garden location in order to better sculpt the land, allow for inadequate drainage, locate plants for optimal sun or weather conditions, and to determine which plants already survive without help.

Easton strongly opposes chemical fertilizers and pesticides and cites studies from the nonprofit organization Environment and Human Health, Inc. One of the most intriguing gardeners and garden designers mentioned is Jennifer Carlson. Step by step we are introduced to Jennifer's goal to recycle all waste generated by her plants and animals with a list of specific suggestions, some of which would work only in an area that allows for keeping animals other than pets.

Lest we think recycling applies only to plant material, we are introduced to Shirley Watts. Rather than recycle, Watts prefers to "repurpose" materials and makes the case that this practice is equally important to sustainability since it reduces the impact from disposing of man-made objects and filling the earth with non-biodegradable items. The suggestions for incorporating such items far exceeds placing rusty old farm implements in gardens and expands the options to use materials that add a sense of history, age and uniqueness, but mostly functionality.

Easton also recognizes the gifts from nature in the form of reliable self-seeders which leads to a discussion of invasive plants and the science of invasion biology, citing the national conference at the Missouri Botanical Garden, which produced voluntary codes of conduct to help the gardening public make ethical choices.

While on the topic of sustainability, Easton discusses climate change and its impact on gardening practices with specific suggestions for lessening our impact. She concludes with "Top Ten Gardening Tips to Save the Planet" before giving the Resources list, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture website of national invasive species: www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov.

Low maintenance gardening does not preclude vegetable or fruit gardens. If growing your own food for the beauty, sensuality, freshness, taste and peace of mind is not enough, then the fact that the average food item in the United States is being transported 1500 miles using 400 gallons of fuel is alarming enough to cause one to pause and think. It is no surprise Easton devotes a section to growing what we eat. She includes lists of edible flowers, the prettiest edibles, herbs and tips for dealing with problems, along with the advice to grow what you love to eat, what is not readily available at local farmers markets, or is most expensive to buy. One of the most intriguing aspects of the gardens she features is the unconventional materials used in patterns of strong, bold design to integrate the edibles into the ornamentals. Commercial sites as well as residential are featured for their innovation and "edible-izing" their towns. Resources include nurseries and catalogs in addition to books and online resources.

Most gardeners would not expect to find container gardening included in a low-maintenance garden; however, Easton contends plants confined to containers and window boxes are less labor intensive if selected from a limited number of plants or using one plant to a pot—or simply leaving the planter empty! In addition to the ability to control soil, light exposure and watering, an added benefit is the design advantage of having a plant elevated. Easton does recommend using the largest pot, at least 24 inches in diameter, to prevent freezing and to provide as much water as possible. She includes a list of plants most suitable for containers as well as bulbs and edibles. Once again, Easton emphasizes the importance of keeping things simple. Resources include online sources for devices to elevate pots and to move even heavy pots.

So, what about the plants we should plant? Easton provides an annotated list of the lowest maintenance perennials for bringing seasonality to the garden. Ground covers are divided into shade or sun varieties with additional notes about ones you can walk on. The selection of shrubs includes only those that grow to no more than 5 feet tall and are small enough to use in containers or as borders. Trees represent the biggest decision since they are literally the largest in size

and cost, and will anchor a space, which may change dramatically as they grow to mature size. To complete the list, Easton identifies plants that should not be placed in a simplified garden since ultimately they will cause more trouble than they are worth.

Whether you are looking for new ideas to make gardening easier, for photographs of exemplary gardens, for specific plant recommendations, for books and online sites, or for little bits of wisdom that inspire and educate, you will find this book meets the request. *SH*



Susan Hooper, an Extension Master Gardener with Mecklenburg County, NC, since 2008, enjoys working in a garden free of chemicals, inhabited by birds and butterflies, and lush with a variety of fragrant and colorful plants. Her status as a nationally accredited Master Flower Show Judge has inspired her to notice the design possibilities inherent in plants at all stages of their existence. Training as a judge has instilled the design principles that give guidance in creating flower designs as well as garden designs.