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In Search of the Low-Maintenance Landscape

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The time stamp on the text message was 2 a.m.

“I mean it,” said the sender, “this has to be low maintenance.”

She was referring to her new landscape plan, which we’d discussed the previous afternoon.

Her anxiety may seem a bit extreme, but she is not alone. Since January, I’ve listened to the questions and concerns of audiences at more than a dozen talks I’ve given in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Ticks, deer, moles, voles, and watering all make the Top 10 list. Many complain of throwing their time and money at lawns that refuse to improve. Surprisingly, many ask about the heights of plants. Some like short plants, it seems, because tall plants take more pruning. Others want something tall, fast-growing, and evergreen to give them privacy from neighbors.

Finally, everyone wants to know about weeds. Why are there so many? Why do they keep coming back? How do we kill them without herbicides?

But if we want to reduce landscape maintenance, weed prevention is a topic rich with possibilities.

Did you know, for instance, that by May 15, many weedy plants were already producing this year’s first crop of seeds? Pull or dead-head weeds with seedheads before they can spread the seeds. Keep them out of compost piles, unless you use a hot composting system and monitor temperatures.

If you want to prevent new weeds, stop turning the soil. In a richly vegetated area such as ours, every inch of earth’s surface—and up to 36 inches below—is filled with seeds of trees, wildflowers, shrubs, vines, and grasses. Seeds travel up and down the soil’s depth through natural processes such as frost heave, the movements of insects and animals, and rain flow. Soil-dwelling critters eat some embedded seeds. Other seeds age, lose viability, and decay into organic matter.

Some seeds remain viable for many years, but they can’t germinate unless they are within the top few inches of soil. There, newly germinated plants can reach sunlight and kick-start their life-support system, photosynthesis.

Here’s the lesson: Dig as little as possible. Never turn the soil to fluff it up. Ditch the rototiller. It churns up seeds and chops up weed roots, which may sprout new weeds. For an excellent discussion, see Lee Reich’s *Weedless Gardening*, Timber Press, 2001.

The value of leaving soil unturned is so well established that many professional farmers have abandoned deep tilling. In a 2017 Kiplinger’s article on “Things That Will Soon Disappear Forever,” they name the plow. For a fun read, see www.kiplinger.com.

For more weed prevention, keep the soil covered with two- to four inches of the appropriate mulch. If you have a veggie garden, for instance, cover it with chopped straw or a cooked hay/straw mixture. Some brands include Mainely Mulch, Luzerne Farms Premium Ground Cover, and EZ Straw, all sold in bags at garden centers.

Baled straw works well, too, but has a less finished appearance. Find baled straw at animal feed stores or on farms. Note: Do not use baled, uncooked hay. It contains weed seeds.

If you have newly planted trees and shrubs, double-ground bark mulch works well. Other good covers include pine needles (especially for blueberries, rhododendrons, and azaleas) and finished compost products such as those offered by Sweet Peet and Coast of Maine.

For something different, cover perennial beds and mixed beds with a thin layer of buckwheat hulls or rice husks.

Or take a cue from our region's natural cover, the forest. It uses only last year's leaf mold. Maybe Nature is on to something.

Whatever the mulch, keep it from touching the stems of trees, shrubs, and other plants. For a quick, informative read on mulching, see *How to Mulch* by Campbell and Kujawski, Storey Publishing, 2015.

Finally, if you are trying to kill an entire area of weeds, an 8- to 12-inch layer of raw wood chips fights both living weeds and new germination. Chips are usually available from companies that take down and shred trees.

Perhaps the adage, "A pinch of prevention is worth a pound of cure," is worth remembering when landscape maintenance raises your anxiety level.

For more about weeds, visit these sites:

- Invasive plant ID and eradication: www.invasive.org/species/weeds.cfm
- Invasive Plant Atlas of New England: www.eddmaps.org/ipane
- Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group: cipwg.uconn.edu

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