

# Colorado Green

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## Designing for **easy maintenance**

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# Low maintenance is good!

By Alison Peck

## Low-maintenance landscaping is really nature-

As the green industry works to lower our harmful impact on the earth, it is time to rethink our landscape values and aesthetics. Many of our aesthetic landscape principles still hearken back to European aristocrats who flaunted their wealth with highly unnatural lawns and clipped hedges and who could afford armies of gardeners to mow and trim. Perhaps because of this, low-maintenance has been considered a dubious attribute for a landscape, translating as low-budget, cheap or boring. But from a green perspective, low maintenance really means that the landscape does NOT need massive intervention and large infusions of water, energy and chemicals. This is good! We need more landscapes like this!

Low-maintenance landscaping is really nature-maintained landscaping. In my book, a low-maintenance landscape is a winning sign that the landscape has been designed and installed in a way that works with nature. Like many good things, low maintenance is local. The designs, techniques, materials and plants that work to create a low-maintenance landscape in Colorado are different than those that work in Seattle, Phoenix, Tampa or Pittsburgh.



*Andropogon scoparius* 'Prairie Blues' (Prairie Blues little bluestem) is one of many native grasses that are beautiful in the landscape.



*Ephedra distachya* (joint fir) provides striking winter interest.



*Rosa* 'BALset' (Sunrise Sunset rose) is one of many beautiful, resilient shrub roses.



*Spiraea trilobata* 'Fairy Queen' (Fairy Queen white spirea) flowers in spring

Photos courtesy David Staats



## maintained landscaping.

The following are several rules of thumb that I have found important for successful low-maintenance landscapes:

- **Use plants to reduce weeds.** If you don't plant something in bare ground, nature will, and it probably won't be something you like, such as bindweed. I know that there are successful Southwestern gardens with large areas of gravel, mulch or even bare soil. However, we have enough precipitation here and rich enough soil that bare ground inevitably grows weeds.
- **Xeriscapes and drip irrigation reduce maintenance dramatically.** Most maintenance in our part of the world consists of weeding and cutting back plants, whether lawns, flowers, trees or shrubs. Our dry climate leads to very few insect or disease problems that require intervention. Xeriscapes have less irrigated lawn and, thus, less mowing and fewer lawn weeds. Additionally, low-water plants almost always grow more slowly than plants receiving substantial water, reducing the need for pruning. Most common garden weeds depend on moist soil; they struggle in a xeric landscape. Drip irrigation delivers water directly to the soil near landscape plants, avoiding watering unplanted areas where weeds are most likely to grow.
- **Shape irrigated lawns so that sprinklers can water them efficiently** with a minimum of overspray. Or design the plantings around the lawn to make use of the overspray. Otherwise, the excess lawn water creates wet areas likely to grow weeds.
- **Group plants according to water use** and then place them in the right microclimate. The right plant in the right place—and soil—is a healthy, low-maintenance plant. The right place/

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micro-climate is vitally important in Colorado. Our elevation and dry, sunny climate creates varying microclimates on the different sides of a house and slope. Mediterranean plants will thrive on a sunny south-facing slope, while a woodland can be recreated on a north, shady slope—and not vice versa.

- **Encourage big, healthy roots.** The most important part of a plant is invisible; it is the underground root system. Plants are incredibly resilient if they have large, healthy roots. The easiest way to achieve this is to use plants that thrive in your existing soil and to water them deeply and infrequently. Many xeric plants like our soil, but some may need soil amendment or careful placement to improve drainage. If you are landscaping in excavated subsoil, with no organic matter or soil life, all plants will benefit from the addition at least one-half inch of compost to begin recreating a healthy soil. Most garden plants from wetter climates thrive in better soils, as will fruit trees and bushes and irrigated lawns. For these plants add at least one and a-half inches of local compost tilled in at least 6 to 8 inches deep.

Remember that the goal is to grow a large root system, so it is important to incorporate compost into as much of the root zone as possible. Do not add compost just to the planting holes, but to the entire bed. Ideally, compost should be added at least 1 foot deep, but that is difficult to achieve in many of our soils without big equipment. Compost is the best soil amendment because the composting process kills weed seeds and pathogens, the nutrients are readily available to plants, and compost is full of microorganisms, which help plants in innumerable ways.

- **Plant most of the landscape with dense plants at least 12-18 inches tall.** Again, the goal is to reduce weeding. Most weeds are unable to germinate and



Photo courtesy Land Designs by Ellison, Inc., and ALCC's Excellence in Landscape Awards

## Consider going **beyond low maintenance** to a **sustainable or regenerative landscape**.

grow under the cover of a dense, established plant. The most common plants in the landscapes we design are 1.5- to 4-foot tall shrubs. We use them in all those areas in a landscape that do not need to provide anything other than beauty—in other words places for sitting, playing, walking or any activity other than viewing.

These shrubs can be arranged formally or informally, as long as they cover the

ground completely when mature. Once established, these shrub beds are as close to no-maintenance as I've found. Occasional pruning and raking to shake down fallen leaves or pull out trash is virtually all that is needed.

Consider going beyond low maintenance to a sustainable or regenerative landscape. Drawing an analogy to health, low-maintenance landscaping is equivalent to the physician's oath of "Do no harm." We

hope our physician will help us heal, just as we are beginning to see that our landscapes can actually help heal the earth. Rather than consuming resources, sustainable landscapes can grow resources and provide invaluable ecosystem services. Simple techniques such as detaining run-off, planting edible and habitat plants, making and using compost, using local materials and planting for energy conservation can create much greener landscapes.

—Alison Peck, recipient of ALCC's 2008 John Garvey Person of the Year Award, is owner and founder of Matrix Gardens, Boulder, and a founding member of the Front Range Sustainable Landscaping Coalition.

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# Alison's low-maintenance favorites



Many varieties of shrub roses offer easy-to-care-for beauty.

**Low-spreading junipers** Plant Broadmoor, Buffalo and Blue Chip. The very lowest horizontal varieties are too low and weeds, including creeping bluegrass lawns, grow right up through them.


**Spireas** Choose spring-flowering Fairy Queen and Snowmound spirea, along with the summer-flowering bumalda and japonica spireas. These include Gumball, Froebel and Neon Flash.

**Low, wide-spreading shrubs** Try Hancock coralberry and Gro-Low and Autumn Amber sumac.

**Blue mist spirea** in its many varieties.

**Deciduous evergreens** *Cytisus* and *ephedra* are xeric and provide striking winter interest with their bright green or silvery blue stems.

**Broadleaf evergreens** *Mahonia repens* (creeping grape holly) and *Mahonia aquifolium compacta* (compact Oregon grape holly) both have leaves, which provide rich green, purple and red in the winter. *Mahonia repens* is widely adaptable, while *Mahonia aquifolium* will do best with protection from winter sun and winds. Carol Mackie daphne has proven reliable in a wide variety of soils, but generally does need a north or eastern exposure.



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**Shrub roses** Many beautiful, resilient roses are available and do not need heavy pruning, watering or fertilization. We have had good success with many of the Canadian Parkland and Explorer roses, such as Cuthbert Grant, all of the Morden roses, William Baffin and Hope for Humanity. Nearly Wild and The Fairy bloom all summer and are nearly indestructible. Many older European rose varieties are very xeric and fragrant. Almost all roses need some irrigation, fertilization and pruning to keep a form dense enough to discourage weeds.

**Vigorous vines** Vines such as honeysuckles and western virgin's bower can be used as groundcovers and grow densely enough to out-compete most weeds.

**Taller ornamental grasses** Grasses have such dense roots that they seem to be able to exclude most weeds, even when there is some bare ground between the crowns. Native grasses are beautiful in landscapes, including many varieties of

switchgrass, little bluestem, Indian grass and Sacaton grass.

**Edible shrubs** Some shrubs offer fruit for people and birds. Clove or golden currants, Nanking cherries, regent serviceberry and sand cherries all thrive here.

**Dwarf or compact selections of larger shrubs** Nanho and dwarf butterfly bush, Lodense privet and dwarf Korean lilac are good choices.

**Barberries** Most barberries are tough and xeric once established. If left unpruned, they offer beautiful forms, textures and colors. Don't forget the green-leaved varieties such as Emerald Carousel®.

**Western natives** Tall and dwarf rabbitbrush, *Artemisia cana* (silver sage), fernbush, Apache plume and native ninebark are worthy selections.

—Contributed by Alison Peck



Photo courtesy Colorado State University

*Caryopteris incana* (blue mist spirea) in its many varieties is a favorite low-maintenance shrub.

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