

Features

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Low Maintenance: The Plant Equivalent of Furniture

Christina Salwitz

“Low-maintenance landscape” requests are growing with new fervor. Disconnected or disinterested homeowners are expertly sold on maintenance as a dirty word by well-meaning articles, TV shows and social media promising landscapes that look like botanic gardens without putting pruners to perennials. Average homeowners envision their yards looking “under control” at all times with absolute minimal effort. They want to create a landscape that can take as much neglect as possible and look okay. Should we help them to replace the phrase “low maintenance” with the phrase “easy maintenance”?

This landscape non-enthusiast sees gardening as a chore on the list. It feels more like going to the dentist or doing dishes than joyfully being with nature. HOW we sell to that end AND keep that relationship with the “low maintenance” customer ongoing is key in this horticultural battle for hearts and minds. Selling high-maintenance plants to THIS customer is like being a matchmaker and putting two incompatible people together.

Strategies for Easy Maintenance

We begin by teasing the right information out with questions that help efficiently and expertly assist customers, then translate their visions into practical answers. But then comes the request: “We want low maintenance, zero maintenance, a carefree landscape, a low-effort or no-effort landscape, please.”

This is what salespeople hear:

“I don’t want to bother with it.”

“This is not a priority for me to spend time or money on.”

“It will be someone else’s problem in a few years.”

“I’m afraid to make mistakes.”

“I can’t afford to maintain anything other than a ‘low-maintenance’ yard.”

“I want the plant equivalent of furniture.”

“I ask my clients how much time they’re willing to put into gardening knowing full well they will overestimate,” says Naomi Goodman, a designer at Firecracker Design Studio in Seattle, Washington. “When they reply, ‘Two to four hours per week,’ I respond by asking if they are willing to give up half a Saturday regularly and those four hours become a realistic ‘nope!’”

What myths are NOT getting addressed about maintenance that keeps us from making sales to this customer?

Myth #1. Lush gardens equal lots of maintenance, which implies work, which suggests non-leisure.

Myth #2. Maintenance refers to a constant state of sameness for many, which is a state that’s impossible for any landscape.

Myth #3. Lawns are the easiest default.

Myth #4. It’s too expensive to have a creative landscape.

“We’ve found that letting customers know plants are living things and there is always some upkeep to maintain a healthy garden (works),” says Shaina Froehlich of Froehlich’s Farm & Garden Center in Furlong, Pennsylvania. “A beautiful landscape is easier than they think! With younger-generation customers, we explain, just as you need to eat, drink, take certain vitamins and have routine check-ups, so do plants. This makes conversation light-hearted for those who think they have brown thumbs and we make a connection.

“We reassure our customers that we’re there to answer any questions, conduct any soil test, diagnose any problems, and recommend fertilizers and whatever they may need. For all IGCs, I think that’s especially important because this is where we shine and successfully gain the trust and loyalty of our customers.”

Changing the Conversation

Landscape architect Thomas Rainier notes that even the most natural landscapes need attention and intervention, and the way we do it now actually requires more maintenance than a well-designed landscape. “The ‘low maintenance’ dogma prioritizes yards over gardens. Layered planting beds full of trees, shrubs and perennials are often eliminated; instead, we opt for the holy triumvirate of the American landscape: lawn, foundation shrubs and groundcovers, because their upfront cost is low and we generally understand them,” Thomas said.

“In reality, these decisions commit us to endless maintenance,” he continues. “We cover our yards with lawns and then must mow, edge and weed weekly. We plant cheap evergreens at our foundations that get too big, requiring regular pruning to keep them from eating the house. We throw groundcovers in our beds because we want them to cover large areas, then we spend years battling to keep them in place.”

Sometimes that intervention needs to take place before the client buys the product, too. “Garden center staff should have some idea of which plants combined take a minimum amount of cleanup,” notes Naomi. “If you

see a cart of herbaceous goodies requiring regular cutting back vs. self-sufficient plants—dwarf conifers/evergreens, self-deadheading flowers, evergreen grasses, etc.—then salespeople could have such a chat.

“That is also predicated upon XYZ nursery educating consumers to make choices where they will be successful home gardeners vs. selling whatever someone has in their cart, i.e. time-sucking plants.”

In the End: Education

“Consumers demand strong, colorful and seasonal-interest plants requiring minimum monitoring,” says Alan Burke, a landscape architect in Washington. “Some newer hybrids from Proven Winners and First Editions offer better frost and drought resistance, expanding hardiness zones, but nursery retailers need to educate consumers on how to care for even the most bulletproof of plant materials during that critical first season.”

Thomas adds that the alternative to low-maintenance landscapes isn’t necessarily high-maintenance gardening. “We should design our landscapes to need less; plants should be tailored to their conditions, we should choose treatments requiring less time and labor,” he says. “These landscapes have engaged owners, making smart decisions over time. They focus not just on time and money, but the compounding rewards of small acts of love and care in the garden.”

Once customer options are re-framed, they discover contentment spending time in the garden. It’s the difference between passionate engagement and the doing-the-dishes side of it. Unlike washing the car, cleaning out the gutters and cleaning the toilet, gardening enriches the soul and we all want to promote that these days. **GP**

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A New Perspective

We checked in with Jeff Gibson, landscape business manager at Ball Horticultural Co. about this topic, and he cited figures from a recent Ball survey of landscape architects and gave us his thoughts:

Technically, there’s no such thing as a “low-maintenance” plant. There are certainly “lower” (many WAY lower) maintenance plants than others. And there’s definitely a need for drought-tolerant plants, which are sometimes used interchangeable as lower-maintenance plants.

PHOTO: Graph 1 here (just the top, we don’t need the bottom – it’s redundant)

There’s a “new movement” and associated planting methodology rising across the country, as exemplified in the works of folks like Denmark-based designer Piet Oudolf, Roy Diblik (Know Maintenance master in the upper Midwest) and Claudia West of North Creek Nurseries on the East Coast. It’s been widely embraced by many in the landscape architecture community.

Designs are increasingly leaning towards “composed” naturalistic designs incorporating both native and non-native cultivars of perennials and annuals. Over time, if done properly, these designs result in lower maintenance compared to the typical urban/suburban same species groupings of plants surrounded by mulch. Proponents of this type of design advocate a “layering” of groundcovers and low grasses and sedges to crowd out weeds, mid-height plants and taller “focal” plants to draw the eye. As more of this style of planting occurs, gradual shifts in consumers’ perception will follow. Contractors and landscape architects both state that “seeing other landscapes” is a major source for design inspiration!

Advice to garden centers with customers seeking “lower-maintenance plants”? Determine what the client or contractor means by lower maintenance: water, weeding, pruning or doesn’t need to be replaced every year. Use the question as an opportunity for additional sales. Do they really just need a better pruner, rake, weeding tool, or better yet, a maintenance service sale (“do it for me” is still the main driver for the main buying audience ... aging Boomers)? Perhaps they would be interested in “living mulch” for less weeds ... sell a groundcover or sedges to fill up the weedy spots. OR stress the point (Roy Diblik is famous for this saying) that it’s okay for plants to touch each other—that crowds out the weeds. For the commercial audience that sells mulch and weed treatment services, suggest they could find lower maintenance, and happier clients, by letting the plants do more of the work.