

Grow with the flow

STORY AND PHOTOS: CARLA KEAST

If ever there was a place for low maintenance gardening, it's at the cottage! We go to the cottage to leave the city behind, including tending manicured lawns and ornate flower beds.

A low maintenance garden, like all well-designed gardens, begins with a plan. Allow enough time to think over ideas and resist removing any existing native vegetation. The less you disrupt the existing native plant communities, the less maintenance required.

Take a look at your cottage lot. What attracted you to this particular place? Keep that vision in mind as you proceed.

GROWING TRENDS

Begin by familiarizing yourself with the growing conditions within your garden as well as those locally. What part of the garden receives the sun all day, part of the day, never? Are there low wet spots or high dry areas?

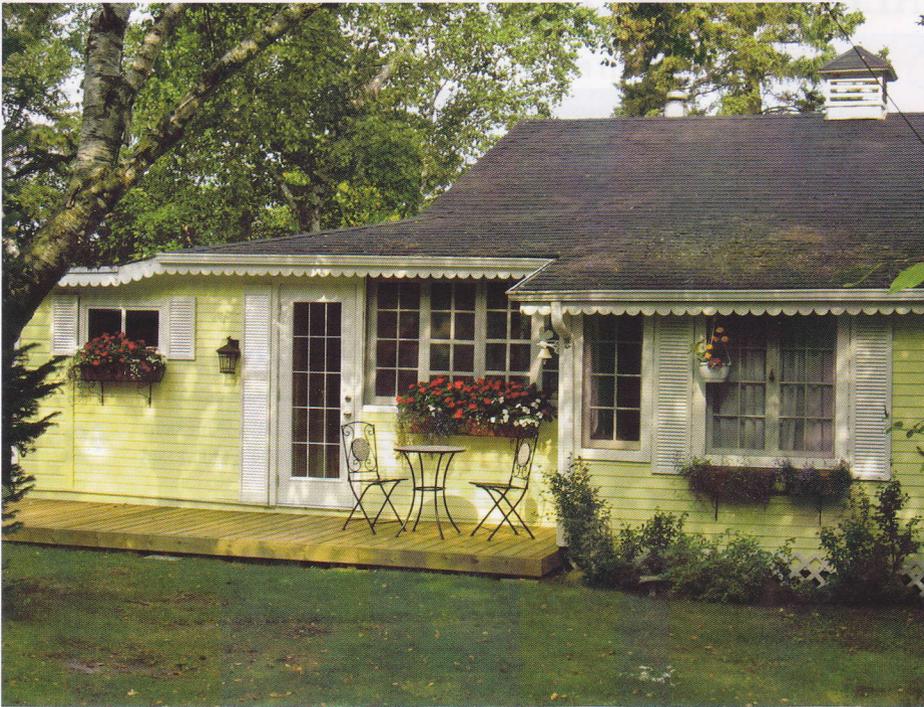
What is the area's amount of rainfall, soil type and soil moisture? How quickly does it drain? Does the soil reside in small pockets within a primarily



Reclaimed pavers keep weeds and mud under control.

Locate your flowerbed in the sun and within reach of the garden hose.





A couple of window boxes add pizzazz but require regular watering.

Combine trees, flower beds and lawn ornaments into a couple of groups to reduce mowing.



bedrock surface? What is the local hardiness zone?

LONGING FOR LAWNS

Lawns are high maintenance; they require regular mowing, watering and, if you want a superior lawn, aeration, fertilizing and top-dressing.

That doesn't mean you have to choose no lawn; just keep it to what is needed, for favourite cottage sports and activities – such as badminton, bocce and water fights. Important views to the lake, forest or golf course may also be enjoyed from across a lawn.

Grass does not grow well in shade, so locate the lawn where it will receive full or partial sun. Adjust the shape of the lawn or combine some of your trees, shrubs, lamp posts, bird baths, and other elements into a couple of groupings. For example, a bird bath can be nestled in among some perennials.

Mowing on slopes is not only time-consuming, but dangerous. Try to maintain existing native plants on a slope, particularly

on waterfronts. If there is exposed soil or sand on the slope, choose thicket or mat-forming plants that will spread ground cover and stabilize the area.

Selectively remove a few larger shrubs or trees to open up a stunning view, but retain shrubs that provide privacy and plants that offer wind protection.

Weeds will grow along the edges of trails that have been worn into the ground. So reduce weeding time by planning a path where you anticipate a lot of traffic; place pavers, stones, gravel or bark to keep both weeds and mud under control.

SMARTY PLANTS

Choose plants last, based on what you envision for your garden and, most importantly, its growing conditions.

Trees, shrubs, and perennials best suited to the area are native plants that are already growing there. These plants, combined with the lake and the surrounding landforms, give a place its unique cottage feeling. If there are existing native plants, the low maintenance option is to preserve them. Many of them may be available from locally owned nurseries.

If you are going to be using non-native plants, select plants that are best suited to the growing conditions. For instance, sandy soil doesn't hold water for long so there's no sense planting moisture-loving plants in sandy conditions. Similarly, some plants spread aggressively by roots, shoots, suckers, or seed and are perfect for establishing a 'bush' but become maintenance nightmares at the edge of a flower bed.

FLOWER POWER

All flowers, even low maintenance ones, require care so plan a flowerbed carefully. Locate it close to a faucet outlet to minimize hauling around the garden hose, or worse, the watering can. Combine a flower bed with existing rocks, boulders and natural elements.

Beds at the foundation of the cottage will help ground it, while others will mark the entrance to your property. Keep the shape simple and start small. It's easier to enlarge a flowerbed than reduce one.

Perennials are a good choice as they only need to be planted once and will come back every year. Again, assess the flower bed location and choose plants best suited to light and soil conditions.

Window boxes, pots and planters full of bright annuals add colour, interest...and maintenance. In addition to yearly planting, annual flowers need regular watering and in the heat of summer this might be daily.

If the splash of colour is worth the extra maintenance, keep in mind that less is more. Have fewer pots, or place them in groups, and within the range of the garden hose. Larger containers dry out slower than smaller ones, and plastic retains moisture longer than clay or wood.

THANKS VERY MULCH

Weeds grow, set seed and multiply wherever there is exposed soil. Mulching controls weeds and helps the soil stay moist longer. Leaf mulch is a perfect fit at the cottage and is readily available. A depth of 2" to 4" is ideal. In places that will eventually be filled in with a ground cover, a depth of 1" to 2" will enable the area to fill in while still getting some benefit of the mulch.

One of the easiest ways to achieve to a low maintenance garden is to change only what you need and leave the rest to nature. Mother nature is a seasoned gardener...who simply grows with the flow. 



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