

Low-Maintenance **HIGH-IMPACT**

Finding the balance between mankind and nature

Story and photos by Russ Turpin



What does the term **“low-maintenance”** mean? A lot of times you might see the word describing a certain plant’s **self-reliance**. Sometimes the term also describes a design style or how much effort it takes to make a given garden look good. Maintenance is a measure of the **work we do** to keep a garden from doing what it does or doesn’t want to do naturally. It’s an ongoing struggle for control: **mankind versus nature**.

▲ Only the strong survive in the garden of Mike Finucane and Eve Podet. This **“self-supportive”** landscape is a suburban refuge to over 100 native species. Here grey-headed coneflower and little bluestem find a home beside a southern black haw viburnum.



▲ Low maintenance and ecological awareness were an integral part of this backyard landscape. The design is based on matching site conditions with “plants that want to be there.” *Echinacea pallida* finds a niche along a woodland border.

The balance point is a harmony. It is a garden that wants to meet our expectations and, for the most part, takes care of itself. For this article, I am talking about the combination of hardy species, natural forms and a relaxed design that lets the plants do the work of keeping the landscape looking good. By knowing what to expect of your plants before you buy them (how they will perform in your site conditions and how much work it takes for them to integrate into your landscape plan) you can create a low-maintenance garden you don't have to fight.

Just how “low” can your garden go? If you leave on vacation, what would your garden look like when you return in a week? Two weeks? A month? A year? By no means do I think low-maintenance means a boring landscape lacking function, color, character or culture. As I have been working on this article, I have had the chance to see four great examples of just how low-maintenance a beautiful landscape can be.

SEEDS WITH A STORY

On a recent hike to the East Pinnacles in Madison County, I came across a unique woodland meadow. This ridge top clearing was covered with *Echinacea purpurea* and numerous butterflies and bees feeding on their nectar. It was literally a buzz of activity, vibrant colors, fragrances and diversity of countless critters in an otherwise quiet forest. Mixed into the grasses and wildflowers, sumac was poised to begin the process of converting this open area back into woodland.

This spot had obviously been cleared of trees, but why? I contacted the Berea College forester, John Perry. Based on available Berea forestry records, that spot had been on fire at least three times over the past 40 years and cleared of trees in 2001. Free of an overhead canopy, the soil's seed bank created a flush of prairie wildflowers nobody would expect to find in the middle of a forest. The best explanation for how these plants showed up there is that over the last 1,000 years, this meadow was periodically burned by Native Americans or settlers to maintain a forest opening, providing a unique habitat for prairie plants and productive hunting grounds.

The restoration of **native grasses and wildflower communities** has provided some great-looking, low-maintenance landscapes that have a big impact on **water quality**.

PLANTS THAT WANT TO BE THERE

In the summer of 2001, Mike Finucane and Eve Podet also cleared out their own forest. From their suburban Lexington lot, 3-1/2 tons of bush honeysuckle and wintercreeper were hauled off to establish a native landscape, rich in Kentucky flora. The plan was to create a very low-maintenance, cottage-style pleasure garden based on, “Plants that want to be there,” as Mike puts it.

Every year they covered a small patch of lawn with newspaper, plenty of mulch and planted perennials to suit the spot. Although they would water the new plants the first year, after that they had to be “self-supporting.”

By adopting a casual approach to individual placement, the plants have been free to migrate through the garden in search of spots that better suit them. The perennials seen today aren’t necessarily where they were first planted. Mike recommends, “Let things grow where they want to grow. Why fight it?” He said if something was too aggressive, it was “time to meet Mr. Hoe.” With nearly 100 Kentucky native species, there is always a show and very little work.

FLOWER POWER FOR CLEAN WATER

The same approach for creating a high-impact, low-maintenance landscape has given the Woodfield Homeowners Association in Lexington something to smile about. The focal point of the community is a man-made pond with steep banks and surrounded by dead fescue. The liner used to hold water in the pond ran 15 to 20 feet above the water line, up the slope and covered with less than a foot of soil, not enough to keep the grass alive. The exposed banks were eroding into the pond and spoils of silt had been dredged out and hauled off by heavy machinery, which further compacted and degraded the soil.

By reintroducing native “plants that want to be there,” I was able to provide a low-maintenance solution that not only beautified the water feature but also reduced maintenance costs. What’s more, the wildflowers, grasses and marginal aquatics have successfully halted erosion as well as provided a nutrient, sediment and runoff buffer to reduce pollutants from washing into the pond.

Although *Echinacea purpurea* was known to occur on this site, the discovery of *liatris*, senna and several *Coreopsis* species indicate this site had been kept open as a prairie, not woodland. These plants suggest this spot had been burned periodically over the past 1,000 years by Native Americans to maintain an open meadow. ▼





Opposite page top: A decrease in maintenance and increase in water quality and aesthetics are the result of this pond bank stabilization. Native wildflowers, warm-season grasses and marginal aquatics are being established to stabilize the soil and prevent silt, pollutants, nutrients and stormwater runoff from washing into the pond.

Opposite page bottom: By creating a “no mow zone” along creeks and stream corridors, communities and landowners are reducing maintenance costs, protecting banks from erosion and creating beautiful native plant communities.

NO MOW ZONES

The restoration of native grasses and wildflower communities has provided some great-looking, low-maintenance landscapes that have a big impact on water quality. Both private and public landowners, such as the Lexington Fayette Urban County Government, are reducing maintenance along stream corridors by establishing “no mow” zones. The dense and extensive root systems of the native plants not only help them survive both periodic inundation and drought, but are able to hold the soil particles together, reducing erosion and providing a gain in water quality.

Berea College has taken a variety of progressive measures to stand out as one of the most sustainable and eco-friendly colleges in the southeast. They have reduced maintenance and operation costs of the large properties adjoining the campus by converting fields of fescue into native warm-season grasses. Mowing these large tracts now only occurs once a year.

What impresses me about these landscapes is how little work it took to keep them looking great. A low-maintenance perspective in your plant selections will produce an arrangement that will support itself with the least amount of care and attention. The key principle is to understand a plant’s character, what makes it happy and how much work it takes to integrate with the overall design. Gardening isn’t just about work; it’s an appreciation for plants. 🌿

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▲ This ridge-top meadow in Madison County tells a history of human influence. A clearing of the trees in 2001 exposed the soil to receive sunlight and resulted in a flush of surprises from the soil’s seed bank.