

SPRING INTO ACTION

BY KC FAHY-HARVICK

FIVE STEPS TO MAINTENANCE FREE GARDENING

My late husband Craig and I founded a perennial plant nursery called Hawk's Nest Nursery. It was part of the eight acre property where we lived and had established more than 4,000 square feet of gardens and two acres of ponds. When we opened for business in 1990, we decided that our customers would benefit from classes and garden tours. We began conducting tours of our gardens every Sunday from Mother's Day to Labor Day. These weekly tours added tons of work to our already crazy work schedule of growing and maintaining 30,000 plants in the nursery, two greenhouses, 3 acres of lawn, and so on. These tours were such a valuable educational and marketing tool for our plant business that we decided to make the gardens a priority, and we developed a system of maintenance that really worked.

Now I no longer have the nursery or the eight acre property, but I maintain gardens for a living and teach gardeners the system we developed. Here in the Finger Lakes region, one of our biggest gardening challenges is to make the most of our relatively short season. Rather than spend half your summer weeding and watering, why not spend your free time sitting and enjoying your garden? If you follow these steps, I guarantee it will help make your gardens (almost) maintenance FREE.



STEP ONE – CLEANING

It is most important for perennials to be cut down and cleaned out in the FALL, but if you did not get it done then Spring is your time to really get squeaky clean. Spent plant material and tree leaves left to decompose in the garden can create more insect and disease problems. Most plant diseases are soil-born. Gently rake out the garden. Best not to step into your garden in early spring when the soil is still very wet. You can do serious damage to the crowns of the plants, and it compresses the garden soil too much, restricting the root growth. I use a small expanding metal rake which can be used between plants, or expanded to rake light leaves. This summer it would be a good idea to place stepping stones in some of the deeper areas of your garden so that in Spring you know where it is safe to step.

STEP TWO – WEEDING

Some of our most pernicious weeds are evergreen, so by the time we get out in the garden in Spring, they are in flower and almost ready to go to seed. The one called 'shot weed' (*Cardamine oligosperma*) is my gardening nemesis. As soon as the snow melts this weed is bright green and growing right along. Though important to get out early enough to get ahead of the weeds, it is more important not to work in a wet garden. Use a sharp tool like the 'diamond hoe', 'swoe', or hand tool that is sharp enough to CUT THE WEEDS just below the surface. Weed seeds can remain dormant in your garden soil for hundreds of years, just waiting for you to come along and pull them up into the sunshine and rain! Have you ever noticed that about two weeks after you weed your garden, there's a nice fresh crop? I know some of you are thinking 'no way', because you've been pulling and shaking weeds all these years. But trust me, cutting off the weeds just below the surface will be much more efficient. Let's say that dandelions DO grow back if you don't get the entire root (my jury is still out on this) well then you'll have one dandelion, NOT a hundred weeds that you've brought up with that huge root.

STEP THREE – FERTILIZE

Liquid fertilizers are perfect for annuals and tropicals, but they are not as well suited to perennials and vegetables. I use only one kind of fertilizer for perennials, Osmocote 14-14-14. It's a slow-release fertilizer that gives the perennials the strong roots they need to survive the winter, and lots of flowers or fruit. Sprinkle it on the ground around your plants and flowering shrubs. Do it in Spring, don't scratch it into the soil so you can see where you've fertilized, and mulch over it later. It releases when the soil temperature reaches 70 degrees, and lasts all season. One application and you are done!



STEP FOUR – WATER

Avoid watering perennials with overhead sprinklers as these tend to increase disease and fungus problems. Perennial plant foliage should be kept as dry as possible. Most diseases are carried over in the soil, and transferred to the plants by moisture. The best system to use is soaker hoses. It keeps the water in the soil, and conserves water by avoiding evaporation. Every time a plant wilts it is stressed, and though it may perk back up when you water, the weakened plant will be more susceptible to diseases and may not survive the winter. The rule of thumb for gardens is one inch of water (rain) per week, shade gardens need TWICE as much. So if we only get 1/2 inch of rain, we need to water to make up the difference. Measure and time your soaker to see how long it takes. Still stuck on that shade thing? It's true, because the trees creating the shade are taking all the water and nutrients first.

STEP FIVE – MULCH

We mulch gardens to help keep moisture in the soil, and to keep the weed seeds from germinating. Using a composted material also helps to enrich the soil and improve the texture as it works in each year. The most preferred material to mulch with would be your own composted leaves. If that's not available, then use cocoa shell (unless you have pets), or triple-ground hardwood. Do not use the dyed wood mulch because it is inferior wood, and does not decompose as readily. Only use 2-3 inches of mulch, and never let it touch the plants. Around trees mulch should never touch the trunks, and you should always be able to see the 'root curve.' Mulch right over the soaker hoses, and you are set to go.



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