



Lazy Summer Days

“Summertime, and the living is easy.” Obviously, George Gershwin was no gardener. Weeds and zucchini double in size overnight; the Japanese beetles are out in force, along with the ticks; and perennials that were glorious just a few weeks ago are looking distinctly ratty. And it’s HOT! A visiting friend once noted, with a smirk, how pleasant it was to sit in the shade with a cold drink, watching me work. Whether you have years of experience or have just started your first garden, it’s August and you’d rather be sitting in the shade. Regrettably, some chores cannot be put off, but there are ways to pare down your to-do list. This blog will discuss some steps you can take right now. Next month, I’ll add long-term ideas to make next year’s garden easier to maintain.

Mulch. Mulch is your best friend. It suppresses weeds, slows down evaporation, and enriches the soil as it breaks down. It’s admittedly labor-intensive to apply, but will save you so much work over the season (and even though summer is winding down, we won’t see frost until late October) that it’s worth doing, even this late in the year. Bonus: this year’s mulch will protect overwintering plants, reducing the need to replace and replant next spring.

Watering. This year I fenced in my first-ever vegetable garden, but didn’t quite find the time to lay out drip irrigation lines. They’re not that expensive, but I was preoccupied with other projects. Big mistake! I’ve spent the summer dragging hoses around, clipping corners and crushing plants in the process, and swearing as I try to untwist the kinks. Never again. It isn’t just a matter of inconvenience, either: After a heavy downpour, or what you think was a thorough watering, stick your finger in the soil. Chances are, you’ll find it’s dry as dust half an inch down. Plants need slooowww watering, ideally mimicking a slow steady rain, so water has time to percolate down into the soil instead of running off the surface. A drip system will do that, without requiring you to stand in the hot sun. You can get fancy with timers and moisture sensors, but even the simplest system will work. Moreover, plants that receive consistent watering will be sturdier, healthier, better able to fight off disease or insect attacks. They’ll also produce more fruit or flowers.

Deadheading. This has nothing to do with being a band groupie. It means cutting off old dead flowers to encourage the plant to set new flowers, and to make it look less disheveled. I refuse to grow dwarf marigolds, because I’m not willing to bend down six

inches from the ground to pinch off ugly shriveled brown blossoms. But many popular plants are more considerate. They drop faded petals all on their own, and go right on producing more flowers. Impatiens and petunias are in this group, called “self-cleaning” flowers, but there are many more. Just do an internet search for “self-cleaning flowers” or “deadheading not required” and you’ll find many suggestions.

Lawn. It bears repeating: The less lawn you have, the less time you’ll have to spend mowing it.

Fertilizer. Your vegetables may benefit from continued feeding until harvest, but don’t fertilize perennials, shrubs, lawns, and trees. This late in the year, you would only be encouraging tender new growth, which won’t have time to mature before the cold weather, and will be vulnerable to frost damage. Wait until late winter or early spring, as they start to emerge from dormancy.

The weeds in the cracks. If you have a stone path or gravel driveway, those determined weeds that grow through are the bane of your existence. Weed killer? Unconscionable. Hand pulling when it’s ninety degrees? Not a chance. Instead, consider harnessing your inner dragon, and do what the professionals do: invest in a flame thrower. I’m trading my crumbling asphalt driveway for gravel (my contractor promises to get to it any year now) and plan to ‘fire up’ to maintain it.

The most important rule: Please yourself. There are no garden police. Unless you’re hosting a garden tour—which nobody is doing in this summer of self-isolating—or awaiting a team of photographers from some glossy magazine, there’s no need to hold yourself to anyone else’s standard of garden grooming. Nature doesn’t weed, or replace old varieties with the newest hybrids, or prune the trees, yet she manages to produce jaw-dropping landscapes at every turn. The perfect is the enemy of the good, and the biggest mistake any gardener can make is to lose the joy of gardening in a quest for perfection.

Excuse me. There’s a cold drink in a shady spot calling my name.