



Lazy Summer Days, Part 2

It's still summer, technically, but even though it's hot, the mood is changing in my garden. The frogs still twang their rubber-band love songs, but less urgently than they did in midsummer. (Unlike me, they don't seem bothered by the trees Isaias dropped into their pond.) Summer annuals, a bit gangly now, still bloom, but they're starting to yield to roadside displays of bright goldenrod and frothy asters. Nearly all the sunflower heads droop brown and empty, picked clean by goldfinches.

As the hottest days come to an end—finally!—outdoor projects become enjoyable again. September is back-to-school time, and even if your children aren't back in the classroom this fall, it's time to do your homework to reduce the workload for next year's garden. It's not laziness, really. Call it smart, and efficient.

Don't Dig. My classic gardening books all recommend double-digging, a laborious process that involves digging down two spades' worth (or 'spits,' if you want to sound like a fancy English gardener) before adding compost and replacing the soil. I've tried it, and it's just as backbreaking as it sounds. Happily, I've abandoned it, because decades of research have demonstrated that digging can damage soil structure. If you want a new garden bed next spring, start now, and let time do the work for you. My favorite method is to lay down brown cardboard (don't use shiny, colorful cardboard, and remove packing tape and staples) and then cover it up with wood chips or some other mulch. If necessary, add a few rocks to keep the cardboard from blowing away. Overlap the cardboard generously, because weeds and grass are relentless at finding their way back to the sun. Then, forget about it. Come spring, all the grass and most of the cardboard will have rotted away, enriching the soil, and you'll be able to plant almost effortlessly. Easy!

Smart Edging. After your new beds are in place, don't sabotage yourself with the wrong edging. Plants don't like to send roots out into thin air, so the simplest, easiest edging is a little v-shaped trench, just a few inches wide and deep. An occasional cut with a spade keeps it neat, and your lawn mower can go right up to the edge, eliminating the need for trimmers and weed whackers. Next best would be a flat edging, such as bricks laid flush with the ground. Again, it's lawnmower-friendly. The worst possible choice is a line of rocks pulled from the ground. The only way to keep them weed-free is by hand, on your knees, several times every summer. Even so, they'll almost always look unkempt.

Trade High-Maintenance Plants for Easier Options. A perennial bed is undeniably beautiful, and the goal of many gardeners, but it's also a lot of work to keep it looking fresh, as plants need to be constantly divided, deadheaded, or cut back. You can lessen the workload by interspersing less-needy plants. Small flowering shrubs provide color that may last at least as long as the bloom time of many perennials, but they need attention only once a year, when you simultaneously prune and remove dead flowers, right after flowering ceases. Flowering trees are even easier. Hardy bulbs are usually a good choice, especially if you plant them behind a later-emerging plant to hide their yellowing foliage. Groundcovers add extra interest and help suppress weeds under larger plants. And don't forget plants grown for their colorful foliage. Leaves come in almost every color, even black, white and almost-blue, and their color lasts for months, without any help from you. When the catalogs start showing up, turn past the tempting pages of herbaceous perennials and take a closer look at other possibilities.

Start With the Right Size. Read the labels! If you can, double-check the variety online (the [Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder](#) is a good place to start) because labels aren't always as accurate as they could be. Choose plants that will only get as big as the space you've allocated. Otherwise, buy very good pruning shears, because you'll be spending a lot of time fighting Mother Nature, and she always, always wins. Shape matters, too: do you want something low and spreading, tall and skinny, or Christmas tree-shaped? They're all available, and all easier to find than ever before. Past generations of gardeners would envy our multitude of choices and the ease with which we can educate ourselves about them.

Mark Plants and Take Notes. It's easier to identify a plant when it has leaves and flowers than when it's nothing but a brown stick. Take the time to go through your garden and mark plants that need to be moved or divided, and make a list in your garden notebook. Come spring, you'll save time and avoid mistakes.

Lazy? No. You're well on your way to a more easily managed garden.