



A water feature can be as simple as a bubbler in a pot, providing pleasing sound and a water source for backyard wildlife.



Above: Deer fern, a native plant commonly seen along the trail, works well in your garden, too.

Below: Drought-tolerant plants, like sunny black-eyed Susan and many of the ornamental grasses, save time and water.



A Hiker's Garden

A few tips to help make gardening easier so you never have to miss a day on trail. *By Pam Roy*

As a passionate hiker and an avid gardener, I've always had a conflict of interests and a shortage of time from spring through fall.

I'd return from a weekend hike, notice the state of neglect of the yard and resolve to stay home the next weekend and get the garden in shape. Inevitably one of my hiking friends would call midweek to mention an upcoming hike. They were planning to camp and get in a couple days of hiking. So much for the garden. This pattern repeated itself on a weekly basis and before I could say "weed the garden" it was late September.

I am sure I'm not the only one with this annual dilemma. But, as a professional landscape designer, there was no excuse for me not to create a plan that would allow me to get in all the hiking I wanted to and be able to enjoy my garden.

Now, in the hopes of not having to hear any of my hiking buddies tell me, "Sorry, I can't go hiking with you, I have to stay home and work in my garden this weekend," I'm sharing some of my secrets with you.

Have a Plan and Stick to It

One of the most important things you can do to minimize time spent on garden chores is to keep it simple. Make a list of the elements that are important to have in your garden. Consider the amount of maintenance time each of these will take, and prioritize those you will enjoy spending time on. Creating a plan makes it easier to break down the yard work into smaller tasks that are easily achievable in limited chunks of time and give you a sense of accomplishment.

Go Native

A great way to simplify is to incorporate native plants into your garden at home. A small woodland garden can be created in a partially shady area of the yard. Native plants tend to need less maintenance, and many of them need little watering once established. Native plants are less susceptible to disease and insects, thus pesticides aren't needed. By creating habitat for birds and butterflies, you'll bring life to the garden with native plants. Planting multiple layers of short to taller plants provides cover and nesting areas for wildlife. Covering bare ground with native plants reduces erosion and soil runoff.

Many of the plants you see when hiking can do well if given the right conditions in the home garden. The evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), which delights lowland hikers with its blue-black berries, is a very attractive ornamental shrub. The pinkish white bell-shaped flowers offer spring color and are then followed by tasty berries. Later on, in winter, the leaves take on interesting bronzy hues. Add a few ferns such as deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*) and maidenhair fern (*Adiantum aleuticum*), and a smattering of woodland perennials such as inside-out flower (*Vancouveria hexandra*), foamflower (*Tiarella trifoliata*), fairybells (*Disporum hookeri*), and wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum*). The bright red stems of dwarf red twig dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera* 'Kelseyii') will add winter color.

Several native shrubs make great additions to ornamental beds in the yard and offer interest throughout the year. Evergreen huckleberry also tolerates sun and makes an informal backdrop or native plant hedge. Oregon-grape (*Mahonia*) can be used as a groundcover (*M. nervosa*) or a taller shrub (*M. aquifolium*). The bright yellow flowers cheerfully welcome spring and are followed by blue-black berries. Oregon-grape also offers bronze winter foliage color.

Need a native plant to fill a large area? Pacific wax myrtle (*Myrica californica*) may be just the plant. Tolerating sun to part shade and a variety of soil conditions, this coastal native has small nutlets in the fall that provide food for birds. Hardy to around 20 degrees, this plant can reach up to 15 feet, making a great screen.

Know Your Dirt

Before selecting which native plants to use, evaluate the soil conditions and the sun and shade orientation of your garden. Determine if the soil is sandy, loamy or clay, and what the pH or acid and alkaline level is. This can be evaluated with a soil test. Pick up a soil test kit from the garden store, or have it done through the Washington State University Extension Office. Select plants to match the soil and light conditions of your yard. Another way to greatly reduce maintenance is to pick plants that will not outgrow the space in which they have been planted.

Once the plants are in the ground, mulch with a 4-inch layer of wood chips to reduce weed growth and conserve moisture. Pull the wood chips away from the stems of the new plants. Consider adding a source of water such as a dish rock, birdbath or water feature to provide water for wildlife attracted to your garden. Change the water in birdbaths every couple of days to remove any mosquito eggs that may have been laid in the water. Consider having your yard certified as a backyard wildlife habitat by the National Wildlife Federation (see www.nwf.org for details). Add a bench and you now have your own personal wildlife retreat to enjoy.

Use Less Water

Use drought-tolerant plants in your garden. This greatly reduces your time spent watering and saves resources, too. Group plants together according to water needs, so that those needing a bit more water are all in one area. Even drought-tolerant plants need irrigation for their first couple of growing seasons. Invest in a basic drip irrigation system that can later be

disconnected. These can be very easy to install.

What about the lawn? If you have lawn, let mowing become cross-training for hiking by using a push mower. Lawns require more water, a valuable resource, and fertilizer runoff can pollute streams. Consider replacing lawns with native plants or edible landscapes. Initially this may be more labor intensive, requiring weeding until the plants fill in, but once they do you can retire the mower.

Keep Your Edibles Up

If, like me, you enjoy growing edibles, put them in containers and raised beds to make harvesting your delicious fresh vegetables and produce faster and easier. Use organic top-soil, or add organic compost to existing soil. Containers can be set out on the deck or near the kitchen, where they can be easily reached during dinner preparation. Being aboveground warms up the soil, which accelerates growth, and it keeps tasty plants out of reach of some of the creepy-crawly pests. A simple drip irrigation system can keep the containers watered. With a few containers and one raised bed, I was able to avoid the produce aisles last summer and fall, all while getting in lots of hiking. It was a treat to grab a handful of crisp green beans from the garden to share with my friends on a hike.

About next weekend ... want to go for a hike?

Pam is a hiker and landscape designer and the owner of Planscapes. To see photos of her work, visit gallery.mac.com/pnw54. If you'd like her help to make your garden hiker-friendly, send an email to pnw135@verizon.net.



RESOURCES

Audubon Society
www.audubon.org

Backyard Wildlife Habitat
www.nwf.org/gardenforwildlife

King County Native Plant Guide
www.kingcounty.gov/gonative

Seattle Tilth
www.seattletilth.org

Washington Native Plant Society
www.wnps.org

WSU Extension Office
www.extprograms.wsu.edu/gardening

Create a low-maintenance, peaceful retreat in your yard with native plants.