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"The Weekend Gardener" - The Busy Person's Guide To A Beautiful Backyard Garden By Victor K. Pryles

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## Introduction

Too many demands, too little time for the joy of gardening? One of the hard facts of modern life is that crammed schedules and crushing workloads seem to conspire to make gardening a threatened pastime.

But everyone wants a lovely garden, a place where the landscape sparkles with refreshment and the beauty of nature. A place where the dirt gets under your fingers; the earth a partner and friend. A setting where you can spend a few restful hours soaking up its beauty and letting it lift your spirit.

Planting your own flowers, developing your own lawn, designing your own garden; these are the joys of gardening that can still be made available today. When you get to pick your own fresh fruits and vegetables you experience why gardening is irresistible to so many lovers of life.

Yet, the long commute to and from work, the few hours we are allotted in our drive to lead successful lives, both financially and socially, seem to lead to the remarkable conclusion, "A garden? No chance!"

Most people content themselves with hiring out a landscaping firm to develop and shape a desirable lawn, and perhaps, a trip to the local 'farmers' market', once or twice a season, for fresh vegetables.

But even these compromises are alternatives that turn out to be prohibitive. Landscaping firms can charge thousands of dollars to re-carpet a lawn, hundreds just to maintain it. Prices at the farmers' market, though usually less than found in your grocery store, are still relatively high and require 'special trips' which eat further into your valuable time. Beyond this, as a weekend gardener you must have a garden plan that won't nag at you like a child in distress. The last thing you need, once you've decided to join the ranks of the great gardening class, is to have your precious time further eroded by time consuming garden activities and new projects that seem to spring up like a monster clown at an amusement park's haunted house. No, a garden is a place of joy, and its daily development should be joyful too.

Choosing the right plants, the right garden spaces, and employing the right techniques in taking care of them will turn your weekend adventure into a gardening delight; a garden that will practically take care of itself.

On the other hand, a high-maintenance garden has you sweating bullets, brandishing hedge clippers, pruning lawn mowers, yanking weeds, tilling and fertilizing - all eating

up every available hour each Saturday and Sunday. If done wrongly, a garden is a nightmarish ritual of whacking away at bushes, trimming grass, chores upon chores until you think your work will never end.

Many times this occurs because ill conceived plans for a particular location are made, haphazardly, all of which later come back to haunt you in your efforts to add to the loveliness of your particular piece of real estate.

Your goal may have been to eventually beam with pride and enjoy the reactions and kudos from neighbors and friends; only to discover you've ended up with an unruly, temperamental cluster of shrubs, bushes, flowers, plants, trees, lawn and flagstones—all overgrown and requiring continual surgery.

This book intends to take you away from that nightmare and point you directly toward the garden of your dreams. So, if you want to join Mother Nature hand-in-hand and develop a plan that really works for you in a time friendly way - read on!

The key is making a garden you can take pride and great pleasure in, and do it with the time that's reasonably available to you.

This starts with evaluating your gardens maintenance needs and finding solutions to common high-maintenance problems. From there you need to make choices and develop realistic wish lists.

All of this early planning, covered in this book, will make your garden work, both its maintenance and development, a pleasure. You will systematically create a place of respite, and peace.

In chapter one I'll explain exactly what a weekend garden is, how it can be properly developed, and how you can start using your time effectively.

We'll move on to the lawn, the single largest piece of landscape for most homeowners. We'll learn secrets that great gardeners have used to make the lawn a friend to your weekend efforts instead of a time draining bore.

Then we will create those fast flower gardens you'll simply fall in love with, learn to plant a succulent vegetable garden, have some fun with fruits and develop natural landscapes. Our adventure continues with the best easy-care ways to choose plants to match your time constraints and local environment. I'll even give you an overview of the plants to use; the tools to employ.

The Appendix to this edition of "The Weekend Gardener"- The Busy Person's Guide To A Beautiful Backyard Garden - includes a step-by-step annual calendar of gardening activities and a USDA zone map to help you choose the plants that match your climate. All in all this is an ambitious book that wants to deliver you from the drudgery and time intensive garden into the bright, sun-splashed, happy weekend garden of your very own. Victor K. Pryles

## **Chapter 1: The Weekend Garden**



Just what is a weekend garden and how does it differ from other gardens?

Simply stated, it's about time. Time that you spend tending your garden. Even though the demands of your contemporary lifestyle may make great demands on you, this doesn't mean you can't also have this

delightful pastime of gardening.

You want your garden to bring pleasure and satisfaction,—not provoke anxiety because there just isn't enough time to plant the petunias, tie up the tomatoes or prune the privet before sundown.

If you're trying to 'beat the clock' you will find yourself stressed and incapable of enjoying the wonderful world of gardening. It's all about healthful relaxation and when the time you have to devote to your garden slams up against your everyday demands that spells trouble.

Believe me you can have a garden and enjoy it too. You need not be a slave to even a large garden. When carefully designed and filled with trouble free plants you will discover the time to b-r-e-a-t-h-e in the beauty; you can let this kind of garden practically take care of itself.

Don't get me wrong, gardening can be a lot of work; there's no question about that! But most gardeners I know find the physical activity to be much better that the kind found in a closeted gymnasium or achieved during a workout with an in-home treadmill. As a gardener, not only are you becoming fit, but you're doing it with nature, in the fresh air and there are real manifestations of your achievements, too.

You get to see the results of your toil in the soil.

The key is making sure the tasks aren't overly strenuous or time consuming. Good weekend gardening can be the perfect antidote to the stress all around us in this new millennium. When you plan a low-maintenance garden you'll discover you actually have time to enjoy some old-fashioned relaxation in your weekend. Once you've created the remarkable vista we have planned for you in this book, it's important to remember, in the end, you'll be able to admire your handiwork. Whether it's sitting in a comfortable lawn chair, lying peacefully in the palm of a hammock, or spreading a checkered table cloth out in the backyard for a picnic - your garden is your little corner of sanctuary in the

world!

If you follow a solid plan for a low-maintenance garden you'll find the actual time needed to grow and care for it to be remarkably 'time-friendly'. If you're spending all of your Saturday and Sunday working it, only to end up exhausted, not refreshed or ready for another tough work-week ahead, then you'll have a garden like a neighbor of mine.

#### My Neighbor's Lost Weekend Garden

Fred used to spend every daylight hour every Saturday and Sunday, spring to fall, working in his garden. He may have been a 'weekend gardener', but he seemed to take so little pleasure in it. He appeared, dressed in his dirt laded overalls, the most unapproachable sort of fellow striving in the throes of his effort. He would scowl, his eyes peering over his glasses with perspiration beading up on his forehead, while he pushed the mower, cut the hedges, or tiled the ground.

His lawn was remarkably tidy but there was really nothing 'eye-popping' about his choice of plantings. He never seemed to actually end the process either. He had constructed a high-maintenance garden and it took all of his weekend to keep it reined in. Fred's front lawn was a small one but it was difficult to mow and care for. It slopped steeply to the street - so he had to grunt uphill while mowing, testing his willpower and straining his body. In the center of the lawn there was a 25 foot weeping willow tree, which was beautiful, but made his mowing even more difficult. The roots had broken through the ground, revealing large lumps which bulged up to challenge his mower. The limbs swept down low enough to slap my neighbor across the face again and again.

His walkway was full of Japanese hollies and cotoneasters which lined the front walkway to the front porch and driveway. Once they must have been cute and seemed like a good enough choice, but they were the wrong choice for the location. They would naturally grow tall and just when they started to cut off the path my neighbor would clip them back. More time intensive work. They required a great deal of pruning and just because he cut them back so regularly they would actually grow back larger.

In the end all of his bushes and hedges had begun to grow together, losing their individuality. Now it was holly with cotoneaster, cotoneaster with holly. It began to merge into a patchwork hedge; a comical loaf of mismatched plantings.

Fred had a large lawn bordered by a stone wall which provided him with privacy. He had a large hemlock screen on one side and trees and shrubs on the other side. He had several perennial beds, roses, along with an apple tree and a flagstone patio.

Though he had achieved his privacy, even as my direct neighbor I couldn't see him back there, but I could hear him - he did work back there alright! I could hear him slave away every weekend. Sundrops had taken over the perennials that had become so shaded that hardly anything else could vie for space. Of course, poor Fred would have to cart bag after bag of fallen leaves to the street each Fall to be picked up. You get the picture, don't you?

Not a great deal of pleasure for Fred. He never found a way to escape the prison of responsibilities and hard, never-ending work required by a high-maintenance garden.

#### A Better Weekend Gardening Experience

If you want to avoid Fred's fate, you need to start by making a critical examination of the maintenance of your yard and garden.

Start by taking a stroll around your property and make note of how much time you take to tend to various areas.

Which plants require the most care, right now?

Are there areas that please you and take less care?

Are there some areas that you love so much that no matter how much maintenance they take you'd not want to change them?

Can you visualize any areas being scaled down in size, or that can be improved with a low-maintenance design or gardening technique?

Where is the problem weeding area?

Which is the most difficult moving area of your lawn?

Later in this book you will get some very specific ways to combat your problem areas as you think critically about the current maintenance problems you must take into account. Take this tour with a critical eye and a notebook. Make some notes to yourself about what you see, what you imagine, and what you are currently faced with.

As you do this preliminary overview remember it is okay to consider what you "hate" to do in regards to gardening work. We want to get rid of these areas first and foremost. Every one has a different take on this subject. Some hate mowing the lawn, others actually enjoy the exercise and like getting out in the sun. Some find weeding tedious, others will enjoy the process of grabbing weeds by the fistful and yanking them forcefully out of the ground. I have a cousin who has actually been found to wander into neighbors yards yanking the critters up (much to the surprise and cheerful appreciation of his neighbors) after he had run out of them in his own yard.

So part of your 'yard tour' is to make note of the areas that require work; how you feel about each one, and listing which are particularly time-consuming. Once you're done, take your list and make a *check mark* ( $\sqrt{\ }$ ) next to those items that you intend to keep no matter how much maintenance they may require. Then put a question mark (?) next to the ones you enjoy looking at, but are nonetheless high-maintenance and take too much work. Later in this book you will discover timesaving techniques you can surely apply to many of these problem areas.

Now plan on making your aim to eliminate those areas left unmarked. You'll want low maintenance ways to turn these areas into sources of pleasure, instead of drudgery.

#### **Weekend Gardening Goals**

Now that you've taken note of the current condition of your landscape, made the notes mentioned above and found particular areas you dislike, could improve, and wouldn't want to change, you are ready to set some specific goals.

Think about your landscaping and gardening goals- how you'd like to use the gardens in your property.

Do you want to use your garden primarily to provide pesticide-free food for your family?

Are you interested in cultivating flowers?

Perhaps you wish to do both; flower gardens and vegetable gardens?

Are you intending to garden for the value it adds to your real-estate?

Or do you just like to collect certain plants?

Do you want an entertaining area as part of your back yard; perhaps a larger patio area?

Is it a swimming pool that you want to add and then landscape around?

If you're like most gardeners you'll have many different, individual goals in mind. Make another general list of these goals and the landscape problems you wish to correct. Some of these goals will be for personal gardening satisfaction, or perhaps just to fix eyesores you discover, or to improve your property's appearance.

Ask yourself what kind of features you'd like to have, like a formal herb garden, a wildflower region, a strawberry patch. This kind of list doesn't require a 'yard tour', either.

This is your *wish list*, the dreams you have that you've always wanted to see realized. Perhaps it might look like this one:

#### **MY LIST**

Redo overgrown foundation planting.

Clean up the weedy back hill.

Get the deep dip in the backyard section near the water well.

Take out the bushes around the wall in front of the house.

Remove overgrown junipers along the driveway.

Get rid of the thin lawn areas beneath certain trees.

Beautify with plant containers near the front door.

Create more privacy.

Camouflage the tool shed using vines or shrubbery.

## **Making Your Choices**

Once you have your lists of goals and wishes you can begin to really plan. You may have to make some hard choices. *Be realistic*. You might wish to have a flowing water garden with imbedded tubes that push flowing colored streams rolling about sparkling river stones through the immaculate Japanese flower beds you envision; but is that really possible?

Just don't let the 'rational' thinker in you destroy your hidden dreams, either. Make some happy compromises and let your imagination run free, too. If you dream particularly large, that's fine. You may want to leave these on a long term list for future consideration. Building that Victorian cottage garden like famous British garden designer Gertrude Jekyll, may be possible a year or two down the road - who knows?

Take your dreams, your goals list, all the notes you've made up until now and put them in *order*.

The order of your goals becomes important in helping you determine the size and effort in any particular gardening area. Remember, you only have a limited amount of time to develop your dreams, you want to invest the most effort in maintaining those areas that hold the most interest to you - first.

For instance, a perennial border in red, white and blue might more realistically be a simpler perennial border. Likewise:

A full-blown wildflower garden becomes a more realistic shade garden

An herb garden with brick paths and a sundial becomes a more realistic rock garden and culinary herb garden

A vegetable garden; to a salad garden

A collection of flowering tress; a berry garden.

#### **Looking For Easy Solutions**

Great weekend gardeners don't necessarily grow fewer shrubs, flowers and vegetables than other gardeners; nor are their properties necessarily smaller. However, they do have a knack for growing plants that can care for themselves. This is key to becoming a successful gardener, weekends or otherwise. Choosing these easier plants for the right place is equally important. Organizing your garden so that high maintenance areas are concentrated together reduce your garden chores considerably, as well.

Like most things in life, once someone shows us the "how to", we learn there is truly 'a better way.' I'd like to give you some sound advice that does just that before we get to the nitty gritty of building your beautiful backyard garden.

#### Slow But Sure Does It!

First, let's realize that taking on the enterprise of gardening should be done slowly.

That's truly the most valuable, cautionary word I can proffer to you. Being ambitious is fine, but being overly ambitious will cause you to require too much of yourself in any one given season. Trying to renovate your entire property all at once may cause you to not complete anything.

If you attempt too much at once, you actually may be creating worse problems; the exact opposite of what a successful weekend gardener needs! I know one such example of this overblown enthusiasm getting in the way of a concrete, well paced plan. In a desire to attack his yard with a vengeance my cousin (yes, the inveterate weed puller) hired a professional tree care company to yank out most of his offending trees and overgrown brush. They also cut down dying, deceased, and unwanted trees, such as mimosa, and turned them into wood chips, which he would use for mulch. He went full-steam ahead on the weeding too.

In the end he had a property that seemed to scream for landscaping. Clear ground that, by the time he had gotten rid of most of the offending plants, found that it was too late in the season to do much planting. He also didn't have the energy or budget to replant the cleared areas. Weeds started reappearing in places where he didn't spread mulch and he

ended up realizing he had really made matters worse by his ill-placed and overblown enthusiasm.

*Next, please do the obvious.* The real key to easy-care landscaping is to begin with plants that are suited to your climate and to the particular exposure, soil, moisture, and other conditions in which you are planning to grow them. These are what I like to call "happy" plants. They grow better because they find their environment ideally suited to them. You'll be happier too, because you have fewer problems with them.

Plants, in addition to needing the proper temperature quotient, also remain healthy when they receive the proper rainfall in their natural temperate zone. Going 'native' in the garden is a good idea. Creating a garden ecosystem together with plants that are in their natural environment makes total sense. Yet, it has been told that native North Easterners will move to the Southwest where the average rainfall can be as little as two inches or under in the desert regions and fill their gardens with water-loving plants that they should have left at the old homestead.

Plants grow naturally in many different habitats— deserts, swamps, bogs, woods, meadows, and rocky screes. Perennial borders, foundation plantings, and open lawns hardly duplicate such natural settings and many times offer plants far from their own ideal. Therefore, natural *settings* should be considered as well as native plants when constructing your ideal garden.

# Weekender's Quick Tip

**Problem:** Formal hedges require time-consuming shearing several times a year or they look very unattractive.

**Quick Fix:** Transform formal hedges into informally pruned hedges, which have a natural shape and require much less attention. Be patient, the complete make- over may take several years of corrective pruning.

It is important to scale down your wish list to keep high-maintenance areas small scale. Instead of planting an orchard, plant a row of low-maintenance blueberries. Rather than planting a large formal garden of herbs, which would require a lot of preparation and tending, why not compromise? Confine particular herbs you really want in clay planters.

Another way to scale down the scope of your gardening is to reduce the amount of your property that you will actively cultivate. Keeping your garden on a smaller scale conserves water and reduces tending and maintenance. Remember an open area can often give fine relief to a more ornate fully landscaped section of your yard. Don't feel like every given inch of property must be developed.

You've accomplished a great deal by following the step-by-step outline introduced here in the first chapter. You can now say you have truly taken 'new eyes' to your property and given some serious thought to how you wish to proceed. When I did the same project I used up a whole weekend just making notes, re-visiting the property a second and third time, refining that list, dreaming and imagining what I'd love to see out there and making my notes.

#### It was time well invested!

Though you may wish to scan through the rest of this book to find the problem areas, or as I'd prefer to say, the most 'exciting' areas that match your particular set of goals and plans; I'll start the next chapter with a look at the single largest piece of landscaping in any yard. The Lawn.

## **Chapter 2: Easy Lawns**



The typical suburban lawn, like the one my neighbor Fred had to struggle with, provides little satisfaction. Any expansive lawn and its maintenance can easily turn into just another monotonous chore. I could see Fred, trying to keep his lawn an emerald green, the hedges and shrubs neatly pruned, and the fallen leaves all raked and bagged

for collection and thought: "that must get pretty old - pretty fast".

Let's make your lawn an easier, more enjoyable lawn by employing low-maintenance ground covers, shrubs and trees. The funny thing about what you will discover in this chapter is that, surprisingly, this easy lawn will most likely far outshine your old one in appearance, too!

#### A New Vision Of Lawn Care

Lawn maintenance consumes more gardening time than just about any other garden chore. They must be mowed, weeded, watered, fertilized, limed, dethatched, re-seeded, edged, and raked of debris including leaves. Add the fact that these chores must be performed at critical times in the lawns' seasonal cycle and you get a pretty rough picture of just how daunting this lawn business can be.

One of the best ideas I can give you is to actually reduce the amount of space taken up by lawn. Flower and herb gardens, shrubbery borders, and expanses of decorative lawn covers can replace much of this large, task intensive lawn area,— especially those difficult to mow areas.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying lawn areas are bad! Heaven forbid! A well-kept expanse of lawn delights the eye and sets off your other landscaping. It is restful and it integrates. Bolder textures of foliage are offset by a fine lawn and can save you from having a garden area that is too 'busy' or overpowering.

Furthermore, no plant can replace the fine-textured lawn. No other groundcover is as good as simple lawn grass.

The shape of the lawn area also plays a large role in the garden's design. Does it curve? Square-oriented? Elongated? Round? Whichever yours is, realize it plays a crucial role in directing the eye and can add special design qualities to the final appearance you intend. Nice to know, as well, that lawns have never been known to block any views!

Here's something to consider as you prepare your weekends around this vital landscaping area: Don't assume that the lawn is the automatic answer to filling up leftover yard space. Do just the reverse - plan the lawn shape and then plant around it!

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