Wilcox Nursery & LANDSCAPE

Native Garden Maintenance

Do my native plants need maintenance?

The simple answer is, YES. Whether you are doing a full garden renovation or planting just a small area, your landscape will need some maintenance. The large amounts of irrigation required for plant establishment will push lots of growth from your new plants, as well as those aggressive weeds that will begin to germinate. Depending on your unique aesthetic values, you may desire a more manicured look or a more loose, natural form. These values will dictate how much and often your landscape needs a gardener's hand or a pair of pruners.

What do you mean by maintenance?

Great question! Maintenance is any input to the landscape that alters the current appearance. This could be trimming, pruning, fertilizing, pesticides and irrigating. Your native landscape may require regular pruning and weeding, but less fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation.

How often will I need to maintain my plants?

This will depend quite heavily on the design of the landscape and how you wish for it to look. A more manicured and trimmed look will require more frequent maintenance, whereas a loose and natural form will require less frequent maintenance. Many of our native wildflowers will benefit from frequent trimming to produce heavier blooming and reduce that tall, thin, and "leggy" look.

But I thought native plants require less maintenance…

This is objectively true when looking at the entire maintenance spectrum. We would expect native plants to require less fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation once established. However, your aesthetic preferences may require more hands-on maintenance to promote more blooms and dense growth, or a more tidy garden.

When should I start garden maintenance?

Immediately. This is true with any landscape. With frequent watering of new plantings, growth will begin. This will also promote growth of weeds that begin to germinate. It is especially important to keep the landscape free of weeds in the beginning for less maintenance in the future, removing them when young before going to seed. Some wildflowers will also require more frequent pruning in the beginning to maintain abundant flowers and dense growth.

Can I do this on my own?

Absolutely! We have knowledgeable staff to advise the DIYers but also offer gardening services.

Tips for Pruning

- 5 D's of Pruning: You can always prune off dead, dying, damaged, diseased, and deformed parts of plants.
- The 3 C's of Pruning: remove crossing, competing, and crowding when shaping shrubs and trees.
- Cut woody branches at an angle just above a growth node.
- Wait to trim dormant plants until late winter or early spring.
- When shaping, remove a little at a time and step back to check your progress.
- Trimming off spent flowers (deadheading) can encourage more blooms and keep the garden looking tidy. But make sure to leave some seeds for the birds!
- Grasses do not need to be pruned or cut back. You can remove thatch using a rake or pulling it out with gloved hands.

Right Plant in the Right Place

You can greatly reduce the amount of maintenance in your garden by choosing the right size and types of plants for your area. Consider the mature size and space accordingly. Plants will be healthier and require less pruning and fertilizer when they aren't competing for the same resources. Planting for your soil moisture type will ensure that plants require the lowest amount of watering.

Be realistic in how often you are going to prune and water. You may be drawn to a specific plant at the nursery but you may regret choosing a higher maintenance option in the long run. For example, choose a naturally tall and narrow shrub for next to a walkway instead of a wide shrub that will need frequent pruning.

Less lawn = Less Maintenance

Turf requires the most water, trimming, edging, fertilizer, and pest control in the landscape. You don't have to throw out your lawn, but reduce its footprint by expanding the planting beds. Keep pathways of mowable ground cover or turf between beds for a neater look. Consider a mixed of mowable groundcovers to increase diversity while keeping the green lawn look. You can target problems areas with plants that grow best there instead of trying to make turf work in less than ideal conditions.

The Bottom Line

Using native plants does not mean no maintenance, but choosing native plants to fit your needs will reduce the amount of yard work you will have to do. Your personal aesthetic preference will be a huge determining factor in how much work your landscape needs. The Plant Specialists in the retail garden center are happy to help guide you through options and solutions. You can also seek expert advice from our landscape designers and gardeners!