

lakescapes

Merging Beauty & Low Maintenance Design

text and photos by KAREN KING



(top photo) This is a man-made "natural" landscape
(photo at left) *cantharellus cibarius* "chanterelle" mushroom,
osmunda claytoniana "interrupted fern"
(photos on page 11) *hamamelis virginiana* "common witch hazel"
and *cornus canadensis* "bunchberry"

What's better than sitting in your beautifully landscaped yard admiring your serene lake vista? Never having to lift a finger to maintain it!! Yes, your perfectly manicured garden captures and frames the view from your home, which is delightfully synchronized in a blush of color, texture and light and it's all maintenance free. The only thing you need to know is...zzz...zzz...zzz... "YOU'RE ASLEEP AND YOU MUST BE DREAMING!!" Or are you?

If you are planning a new landscape project, or hoping to enhance an existing one, maintenance is a waking reality for at least the first few growing seasons or until the plants are well established. However, there are many ways to reduce the amount of time that you need to spend caring for your gardens.

In the years that I have been designing and installing lake landscapes, or "LAKESCAPES" as I like to call them, I have seen many properties filled with features of natural beauty, each unique and wonderful. We need only stop and look around to enjoy nature's "low maintenance" landscaping. Some of the most uncultivated landscapes that exist make zero demands of our time, yet are the most beautiful and intricate of all. This is due in large part to the tenacious adaptability and rugged beauty of the native vegetation that is uniquely Maine.

“Native plants”, described by the University of Maine’s Cooperative Extension, “are species that arrived in Maine without human intervention, perhaps thousands of years ago, or originated here.” We can see how non-native plants, or renegade species, can overtake our native species and choke out valuable food and habitat from our native wildlife, flora and fauna just by taking a drive along our local highways. We can’t help but notice all that “pretty purple stuff,” Purple Loosestrife or *Lythrum salicaria*, growing everywhere. But what we don’t see is the wholesale consumption of soil nutrients going on below the ground, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for indigenous species to compete. Our natives are incredibly diverse and well adapted to extreme conditions and micro climates as evidenced in such landscapes as the “Desert of Maine,” the coastal marshlands, the stony peaks of Mt. Katahdin and in our own Lakes Region. With the invasion of non-natives we will begin to see the changes in our landscape along roadsides, fields and yes...even our own front yards. Be sure that you check with the Maine Cooperative Extension Service to be certain that you are not harvesting endangered or invasive species if you are thinking about transplanting any of these wonderful specimens from the local woods or roadsides into your gardens. Oftentimes these native plants have a symbiotic relationship with their environment and will not survive

yellow mushroom, *Cantharellus cibarius*, peeps out and thrills to the light of its brief debut. And there, on the cool ground, you see the small deep green leaves with weblike ivory veins of “Partridgeberry” or *Mitchella repens*, waiting in the leaves for its cue. Here then, in this location, is where you decide to expand your natural low maintenance landscape.

But first, before you start planting, let me give you some of the dirt on soil to help your “natural” landscape stay natural. Less is more!! Less loam and more compost (pH neutral) is better for your plants. A complex breakdown in soils and organic matter help create a strong network of “mycorrhizal fungi” that attach to plant roots thus helping them more rapidly absorb nutrients and water and allowing them to adapt to harsher conditions. As Master Gardener Ellen Klain explains, “Soil disturbance (tilling or hoeing) destroys this fungal net which can take months or years to reestablish.” Klain says “Feed the soil not the plants. Healthy soils support healthy plants and the microorganisms in the soil are the powerhouse of soil fertility.” The “natural” gardener knows that the use of chemical fertilizers are not only time consuming and expensive to apply, but can also harm those root helpers as well as slough off or leach into our lakes, where the dissolving phosphorous becomes a fertilizer to algae and a detriment to water quality.



anywhere else. Many garden centers now stock field and nursery grown Maine native plants for their customers because it is not only profitable but low maintenance for them as well.

Some of my native landscape favorites are: *Viburnum alnifolium* - “Hobblebush”; *Hamamelis virginiana* - “Common Witchhazel”; *Comptonia peregrina* - “Sweet Fern”; *Cornus canadensis* - “Bunchberry”; *Mitchella reptans* - “Partridgeberry”; and *Polygonatum pubescens* - “Solomon Seal”.

Capitalizing on these types of native plants in your landscape, with their resilient habits, are sure to shave hours from your gardening maintenance time. These plants require nothing, save your eco-prudence and a patch of ground to homestead. So how do we encourage these native treasures in our landscapes? Simple!! Don’t discourage them. Remember, they have grown and cared for themselves without our slightest assistance.

We can build our landscape gardens *around* them, incorporating them as accents or as the focal point. For example, maybe that soggy old stump, blackened and contorted, that you’ve been meaning to chop out of your back yard for years (a time consuming job) can take on new life in the “natural” low maintenance landscape. Perhaps one day you notice how spears of sunshine spotlight the emerald green mosses as delicate as tiny feathers, *Polytrichum juniperinum*, that are overtaking the roots and base of that old stump. A bright

Now, getting back to the planting, let’s enhance your garden by adding some native plants like *Onoclea Sensibilis* or “Sensitive” ferns around the stump. Then maybe a little *Tiarella cordifolia*, “Foamflower”, to catch your eye and perhaps an *Aronia melanocarpa* or “Black Chokeberry” to give balance to the heaviness of the stump and create depth and height, as well as provide fruit for birds. Mulch your new plantings well for moisture retention so you won’t need to spend a great deal of time watering these hardy natives except while the plants are getting established. Every other spring alternate mulch, compost or peat moss for top dressing in the beds; this will add tilth without root disturbance and increase aerobic activity in your soil. Add a few interesting rocks (we all have plenty of those), a nice bench and, Voila!! There you have it! We’re talking native, we’re talking natural, we’re talking beautiful. And best of all, we’re talking low, low maintenance.

So, go ahead, go back to sleep now and enjoy all your free time while Mother Nature tends your natural lakescape!

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