

Dig into low-maintenance gardening

When summer's activities beckon, the last thing anyone wants is to be stuck at home tending the garden. Even avid gardeners appreciate relief from time-consuming or repetitive chores. Fortunately, most of the work that needs to be done in the garden can be "engineered out," leaving more time for the homeowner to simply enjoy the garden or participate in other seasonal activities.

Drip irrigation, mulch and the use of the right plant in the right place can reduce maintenance substantially, said Joyce Schiffer, president of the DIG Corp., manufacturers of drip irrigation equipment.

Unlike overhead sprinklers and hose-end nozzles that splash water every which way, drip irrigation delivers water through tiny emitters or miniature sprinkler heads placed near the base of a plant, and at a pace that is readily absorbed by the soil without wasteful runoff or puddling.

Another benefit: Disease spores that are carried from plant to plant by splashing water from overhead sprinklers tend to "stay put" because, other than rainfall, there isn't splashing of water. This benefit is especially important when growing roses, zinnia, cucumbers and other flowers and vegetables whose foliage is susceptible to disease spread by spores carried by water.

The best way to explore the benefits of drip irrigation is by buying a kit that contains the various parts needed to install a complete system. For the best value and ease of installation, look for a kit that can be expanded as your needs change. DIG offers two expandable kits: the DIG Drip Watering Kit (G-77),

which is outfitted with drip emitters, and the DIG Microsprinkler Kit (EF-55), which is equipped with microsprinkler heads. The kits are available at garden centers, home building stores, discount chains and similar retail outlets.

If you think mulching vegetable beds with wood chips, shredded bark, pine straw or the like is merely a "beauy dressing," think again. Mulch also keeps the weed population way down and any seedlings that do sprout are easy to spot and pull out.

Mulch also shields the soil from the drying effects of sun and temperature. Soil that is evenly moist and at a steady temperature helps roots grow strong and supportive.

While organic mulches such as those just mentioned are especially recommended, pea gravel and other small stones can also be used.

The benefits of reduced maintenance and healthier soil conditions are similar. Stone mulches are more expensive to buy, however, they last indefinitely compared to organic mulches that should be refreshed every other year because they quickly decompose when in contact with the soil.

Another maintenance saver: Instead of spreading mulch directly on the soil surface, first lay down a landscape fabric and then spread the mulch.

Such fabrics reduce maintenance even more because they block weeds from sprouting and add useful life to organic mulches by slowing decomposition.

A plant that is in an area of the yard that is to its liking will take far less work to keep healthy than one that is struggling because it's getting the

wrong mix of sun, moisture, soil type, etc. A plant undergoing such a struggle is much more prone to be harmed by stress brought on by drought, insects and disease. Stressed plants are fragile and need a lot of work to keep them moderately healthy.

Check the care tag that comes with the plant for specifics. For more information, ask your nursery or county extension agent or research the subject at your library. The point bears repeating: You can dramatically reduce time

and effort spent gardening by choosing only those plants that fit the conditions and time you have for them.

It's often said that "information is power." To help plant lovers get more enjoyment with less work, DIG Corp. offers a free, easy-to-follow booklet on drip irrigation and its place in the low-maintenance landscape. For a copy, send a self-addressed, stamped, No. 10 envelope to DIG Booklet, 130 Bosstick Blvd., San Marcos, Calif. 92069.

Summer furniture has looks, durability

Summertime, with its warm weather, means different things to different people. For some, it means barbecuing with friends, while for others, it means lounging poolside. Yet, for almost everyone, it means spending a lot of time outdoors.

According to John Miles, executive vice president for HomeCrest, a furniture manufacturer, "As more and more people spend their leisure time at home, the decor of the exterior has become just as important as the interior."

However, just as important as the aesthetic qualities are the furniture's performance attributes.

"Purchasing outdoor furniture is a lot like buying a car," says Miles. "Although it is tempting to purchase a car based on its appearance, you must first look under the hood to make sure that what you are getting is top quality."

In addition to the chic design, furniture should be comfortable, functional and durable. Gone are the days when

outdoor furniture meant a picnic table and benches or a few folding chairs. Today's furniture meets diverse needs, including coordinating, functional pieces like tea carts, serving tables and planters.

"Selecting furniture with coordinating fabrics is easy as long as you know what questions to ask," says Patti Frye, fabric merchandising manager for furniture manufacturer Lane Venture. "Among the most frequently asked questions: How will the furniture and fabric stand up to weather conditions? Is the furniture easily cleanable? Can the fabric be washed?"

When it comes to the durability of the furniture and fabric, look for frames that have a protective coating to prevent weather-related deterioration. Also, when selecting furniture fabrics and cushions, look for those treated with a finish, like a fabric protector.

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