

"LABOUR-SAVING GARDENS"

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There is no such thing as a labour-saving garden. All gardens cost labour. But different gardens cost differing amounts of labour, and different gardeners have differing ideas on the amount of labour it is reasonable to spend. A "labour-saving garden" strictly means a garden which costs as little as possible in labour for upkeep, consistent with fulfilling its owner's desires. The most labour-saving garden of all is a section covered with concrete, but it wouldn't fulfil the desires of many gardeners!

But you never get something for nothing. Saving of labour in one direction means the expenditure of money or effort somewhere else. Even the section covered with concrete, which never costs labour through the years, costs effort and cash in the beginning, when the concrete is laid. This relatively obvious fact cannot be belaboured too strongly.

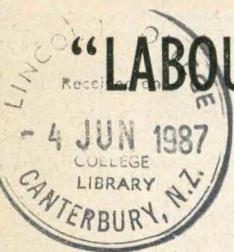
Labour-saving in the garden is no different to labour-saving on the farm. The farmer who runs his many acres single-handed has the assistance of machinery and other forms of capital equipment to speed his work; his buildings are laid out to apply the lessons of time and motion study, so that wastage of effort is avoided. The gardener has to approach his problems in the same way. Labour goes further by employing machinery and other aids to speed work; labour wastage is reduced by effective layouts, combined with the removal of forms of gardening costly in effort.

Planned Labour-saving

Labour-saving gardening begins before the garden is ever in-existence, for it begins with thought about what you

are to grow and how you are to organise it into a garden. It begins with a plan. This is the initial expenditure of effort, which many are unwilling to give. But a plan which costs about two or three evenings of thought can easily save that effort in avoiding time-wasting snags. Time can be saved either by the application of common sense to the layout of the garden, getting rid of repeated waste of labour by the assembly of those areas between which one has to go back and forth; or by spending money in introducing low upkeep items. A fence is more costly in cash than a hedge, or a paved area more costly than a lawn, but their maintenance is negligible when once installed.

A concept of landscape gardening which has gained considerable favour overseas is the treatment of the garden as a mere outdoor extension to the house. The house is ideally organised as three units, and the garden can be organised to correlate with them. The service rooms of kitchen and laundry may, with advantage, have the service areas of the garden — garage, vegetable garden, fruit garden, and the various utility outbuildings — assembled within reasonable proximity. The various rooms of the house which one regards as being relatively private — dining-room, sitting-room and bedrooms — may be associated in the plan with the private part of the garden, which is screened from both the street and the utility area of the garden. The third unit of the house, the public approach, should be associated with the part of the garden which is seen from the street. A common-sense assembly all round, which enables the saving of half-minutes all day long.



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Unfortunately this is seldom possible. The house layout is frequently not conducive to this unified approach. Rooms are not assembled into their blocks according to utilisation; the front door is either an ornament or around the side or rear of the house. But if your house and garden are laid out in a unified fashion it provides a basic advantage in the problem of labour-saving.

Mechanical equipment can save time, but even this needs to be allowed for in the planning stage; access to the hedge for the power trimmer; the avoidance of odd bits of lawn which cannot easily be mown with a motor mower; or the avoidance of awkward angles and corners which cost time and temper to negotiate. Your layout must always allow the most efficient use to be made of machinery. Obstacles of any type should be avoided. This does not mean, however, that your garden has to consist of straight edges and straight rows. Machinery can be handled effectively without this negation of design. The choice of planting material profoundly affects the expenditure of labour. The use of bedding plants as the backbone of a garden planting is most costly in effort, for plants have to be changed twice and possibly three times a year, regular dead-heading is required to maintain a colourful display, and the general care and attention is relatively costly in time. On the other hand, the use of flowering trees and shrubs is a method of economising in upkeep without losing too much colour. In actual fact it is difficult to provide a graded list of the relative amounts of time required by different plantings. It depends on the wisdom of plant selection and general suitability to the environment and upon the degree of spic and span neatness which the gardener demands.

Choice Of Plants:

Banks of annual plants used in lieu of bedding-out can be much cheaper in effort, being sown on the spot, although they may not be so long lasting in effect. Herbaceous borders on their own are fairly costly in labour, requiring staking, tying, top-dressing, forking over and so on in due season. But the choice of self-supporting plants — iris, for example — in preference to the

weak-kneed can reduce effort — and the labour of mowing a lawn, edging onto a border, is less where plants do not flop unduly. Vigorous growing herbaceous plants like michaelmas daisy demand division at frequent intervals and are much less desirable than those slow-increasing types such as paeony which look after themselves, despite the immediate effect they give. The adage of "More haste less speed" is very true when it comes to labour saving.

Hedges are another example of this truism. The average gardener buys the most rapid-growing type available — macrocarpa or escallonia are examples — partly to obtain a quick result, and partly because it is cheap. It grows quickly and needs frequent trimming. Its vigour causes depletion of the food reserves in adjacent soil. But if patience can be kept the best hedging is often one of the more expensive lines — they cost more because they grow slowly. Trimming is required much less frequently — only once a year with many plants — and root competition with adjacent plants is much less severe.

Trees and shrubs have been instanced as plants which cost little in labour, but they do cost effort if badly chosen. Plants which grow strongly and need constant trimming to keep within bounds, or are susceptible to pest or disease and need spraying at too-frequent intervals should be avoided. Flowering plums, due to the attack of slugworm, and manukas, due to manuka blight are unfortunately tending to come within this latter category.

Rock gardens are very costly in hand labour, despite the undoubted charm which they possess, but it is as well to point out here that there is a psychological factor which enters into garden upkeep. A job you can finish in half-an-hour is much less effort—so it seems — than half-an-hour's work on a job that will take another couple of hours to finish. And this tends to apply to work on the rock garden, for all the jobs there are small ones.

Ground cover plants are seldom seen in New Zealand, although they attract considerable favour overseas. Ground cover plants are perennials, usually woody, which carpet the ground to a greater or lesser depth, smothering

weed growth and cutting maintenance to a minimum. In the first years of their life they probably need more labour than most things, for they have to be kept free from weed whilst unable to smother it. But as soon as they cover the soil surface the growth of any seedlings which attempt to gatecrash is inhibited. For open position there is probably nothing better than the various forms of heather. Depending on species they flower in summer or winter, and they make an excellent feature on their own account. Shady spots are not so easy to furnish, and those plants which tolerate such a spot—ivy and periwinkle, for example—are too frequently regarded as weeds. But there are suitable plants and this method of labour saving is one which should be investigated more carefully.

When one gets down to the detail of garden design, as opposed to the broad issues or choice of plant material, there are many little dodges for economising in labour, although certainly some of them may cost money. A rule of thumb which can be applied in some countries regarding garden costs is to estimate garden expenditure at about 10 per cent of the cost of house and section. This figure is very rarely attained in New Zealand. If it were, the use of structural materials, which in themselves are labour-saving, would be much more widespread. When the potential expenditure is low there is still no reason why this rule of thumb figure should not be attained. Good planning in the first instance enables you to see all the jobs which integrate to make a satisfactory garden which avoids waste of effort. And good planning enables these various jobs to be carried out in their proper sequence as time and finances allow. Impatience is the worst enemy to a labour-saving garden.

Lawns:

Lawn-moving is a constant and repetitive job, but we cannot do without a lawn. It provides the base line, as it were, for the contrasts of form and colour which make a garden. But work can be minimised by avoiding splitting the lawn into sections, which multiply edging and hand clipping. If your machine cuts 14 inches, then a 40 inch

width of strip means three passes with the mower, but a 45 inch strip means four. There is no quick short cut to labour-saving—it is achieved by attention to numerous finicky little details like this. Mowing strips of concrete along the edges of beds avoid frequent edging, and such edging as is required may be quickly carried out with a wheel cutter. The avoidance of small beds cut in the lawn not only adds to the effectiveness of your design but obviates edging, too. If at all possible the lawn should finish either on a mowing strip—six inches wide—or against a paved path which is flush with its surface. The use of small kerbs on paved paths add to your labour, for dirt spilled over the bed edge onto the path cannot be swept straight back. It has to be picked up on a shovel. Gravel paths should have a small kerb, however, to retain the loose surface from spreading on to adjacent areas, particularly if they be grass, though it is still possible to combine a kerb edge with a mowing strip if desired. The top of the kerb is level with the lawn surface, the path being sunk. There is no need, in this case to have a wide mowing strip. If the kerb be, say, four inches thick, it can be chamfered to two inches wide at the top by inserting a triangular piece of timber in the top of the boxing when concrete is poured. Grass will grow over this small strip and disguise it.

The labour involved by a lawn depends, too, upon the standards of horticultural perfection we desire. The use of rotary mowers enables mowing to be less frequent, and yet long growth can still be controlled. With reel mowers, whilst it is admitted that the standard of finish is much better, mowing has to be more frequent. Control of long grass with this type of mower is far less easy, and, indeed, is somewhat exasperating.

Raised Beds:

The use of raised beds, built in brick or stone, save your back, for weeding, cultivating and watering are easier to carry out, and they give a permanent clean line between the grass panel at its base and the plants in the bed. If these latter do sprawl

—well, it adds nothing to your labour bill. And if a raised bed is planted with low and free-growing shrubs the maintenance is negligible. The use of raised beds gives an air of definition which it is difficult to obtain from other plantings. They provide a positive structural element which is especially useful in the smaller type of garden. They can be adapted to use as merely surrounding and enclosing features, or as an item of focal importance. A paved approach to the house, high-lighted by a raised bed planted with a permanent combination of attractive small shrubs can be both economical in labour and distinguished in appearance. Casual damage of all types is obviated by the bed's height, whereas a bed at paving level could be walked over and easily damaged, as well as becoming a receptacle for odd debris which blows around.

Labour Saving Gear:

Gardeners are not too well provided for in labour-saving equipment. There is certainly a multiplicity of equipment on the market, but the ideal of a compact power unit to which numerous accessories can be quickly coupled has yet to be introduced. Most dual purpose machines take so long to adapt to their new job that it would frequently have been quicker to do the job by hand. The garden which is most economical in labour is one which makes use of permanent plantings, and cultivators are infrequently needed with them. Motor mowers and hedge trimmers are too well known to require discussion; it is in the field of efficient sprayers, small tools and water-sprinkling devices that labour-saving most likely will be achieved. Few gardeners possess a really effective knapsack sprayer—and yet spraying is one of the jobs we are frequently bound to do, whether it is liked or not. The average gardener spends far longer either on the end of a hose or in shifting hoses than he should do. There are highly effective permanent

sprinkler systems available which when once installed merely need a turn of the tap to operate them. When sprinkling is over the nozzles drop back to their position below ground and out of reach of the mower.

Weed Control:

Weed control chemicals cannot be classed as equipment, but their efficient use can save labour in many ways. The use of hormones for lawn weed control is well established, but the use of chemicals such as Phytazol A for clean-up of existing vegetation, or pre-emergence weed-killers amongst newly planted shrubs has been far from widely exploited. Weed control by cultivation will always remain of major importance in the home garden, however, and the application of basic rules of husbandry will materially aid control here. Hoeing or scuffling the surface before it is apparently required is frequently regarded as a waste of time, but five minutes then save half an hour later on. Small weeds can be chopped off, but large weeds have to be hand-pulled one at a time. Perennial weeds are the worst curse in a garden, but if the ground is cleared completely before planting, either by chemicals or cultivation, the problem is slight. Again, it should be pointed out that hasty preparation and planting leads to permanent expenditure of labour later on. Once perennial weed roots are firmly interwoven with those of the rightful inhabitants of a bed eradication is almost impossible.

In Summary:

Garden maintenance can be either costly or cheap in labour depending on what we expect from our garden. But it is possible to obtain equal aesthetic pleasure from each type of layout, depending on our individual reactions. There is only one golden rule in producing a labour-saving garden—the labour you save through the years depends very largely upon the thought, energy and expenditure you put into the job at its commencement.