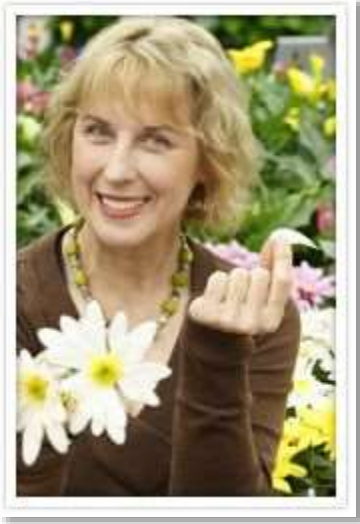


THE BUFFALO NEWS

"Great Gardening," by Sally Cunningham



Sally Cunningham

Gardening from a Hammock is the title of a book by Canadian garden writers Dan Cooper and Ellen Novack, and it was the subject of his talk when Cooper visited Western New York last weekend. Can you really garden from the hammock? Well, perhaps not while you're in the hammock, except for the thinking part. But he discusses designs, techniques and plant choices for home gardens and landscapes that require the very least effort possible, so you can actually have a pleasing garden and plenty of time to spend in a hammock or on a deck chair.

Then during the same garden seminar other experts spoke, both national and regional, and this was the revelation: In one way or another we (myself included) all provided variations on the same themes – how to decrease work and increase success. Every speaker acknowledged the challenges of gardening, from weeding and watering to winter and wildlife. Everyone commented on our aging and busy gardening population, with everybody wanting less work. And everyone pushed careful plant selection and thoughtful garden design. It's not a new message – work smarter, not harder – but doing so takes some rethinking about our gardening ways.

The Plants We Choose

Gardening conferences always include best-plant talks. Speakers cover the rare or exotic plants that collectors want, or the recently introduced and allegedly improved cultivars that cause lust and drooling among plant geeks. But as [Dawn Hummel](#) said: "No matter how gorgeous it is – and I'm a sucker for variegated anything – it's no darned good if it dies by next spring or runs all over your other 17 favorites."

"OK, honestly, how many of you assess the open spots available in the garden before you go plant shopping?" she asked the audience.

Almost nobody raised a hand. She reiterated the first rule of horticulture: Know the site available, and match the plant to the site. She also said that a nursery or garden center professional should be able to hear your specs – the site, the look you want – and lead you to the right plants. The right plants mean less work.



“Hostas are the perfect ‘Guy Plant.’ They rest under the snow in winter. You lie on the couch and watch football. And then in the spring, they’re back. Just look at your garden!” said [Mike Shadrack](#), hosta expert.

Select for Size

A plant’s mature size is crucial if you want to decrease yard chores, especially tree pruning. Hummel and Cooper both recommended trouble-free trees or perennials, and recommended dwarf cultivars in yards with limited space. Lest you think that “dwarf” means 3 feet high, check this definition: A dwarf is a shorter variety or cultivar compared to the species plant. A wonderful dwarf ginkgo tree may grow 20 feet tall, compared to its 50-foot kin.

Slow-growing is another highly desirable descriptor if the goal is low maintenance. Some of Hummel’s “Top 20 Favorite Small Trees,” hardy enough for Western New York and sized for urban lots, are Snow Fountains Weeping Cherry, Japanese Snowbell ‘Marleys Pink,’ *Acer griseum* (Paperbark Maple) and various *Cotinus* cultivars (Smoke Trees).



Prunus 'Snow Fountains'



Close up of Prunus 'Snow-Fountains'



Prunus 'Snow Fountains' in fall

Group by Water Needs

Experts in most gardening forums today stress the crucial message about water use, for practical and ecological reasons. Scientists predict that water shortages will soon be one of the greatest crises of this century, with dire consequences for nature and the human condition. In my “Nature Friendlier” landscaping talks, I urge gardeners and landscapers to group plants according to their water needs – sedum, coneflowers and grasses out where drought is inevitable, and the willows, rodgersias and other thirsty plants in boglike conditions so the least watering is necessary. Without having heard my talk, Cooper reiterated the point and showed many of the same drought-tolerant plants – even specific choices such as the ground covering Sedum spurium ‘John Creech.’ Proper grouping, a basic Xeriscape principle, is both low maintenance and simply good gardening. How and when you water also counts – base of plant; morning if possible, Cooper said.



Polygonatum odoratum var. pluriflorum 'Variegatum'
Missouri Botanical Garden

Place According to Behavior

In her talk with husband Mike on shade-loving plants, [Kathy Guest Shadrack](#) described gardening with some notoriously ill-behaved plants, but in such a way that their habits are appreciated rather than lamented. At [Smug Creek](#), the Shadracks’ sprawling, intensely planted Boston garden, she placed the giant Petasites japonica along the creek on the far side of the house. (The plant is also labeled Japanese butterbur or bog rhubarb and is often called a massive thug.) In its location it can never encroach upon their collectibles. No work. And it is the plant that most visitors comment about (except for hostas). She also collects and grows plants that are known to “run” such as Solomon’s seals (Polygonatum, which has species of many sizes and

variegation) and Epimediums. Spreading plants that are placed where a ground cover is wanted: great, that is low maintenance.

A simpler take on low maintenance was presented by “Hosta Man” Shadrack, however. With all due apologies to men, he said, “Hostas are the perfect ‘Guy Plant.’ It rests under the snow in winter. You lie on the couch and watch football. And then in the spring, it’s back. Just look at your garden!”

Choose to Avoid Trouble

In a talk called “Plants and Pairings for a Great Spring Garden,” [David Clark](#), gardening instructor at the [Buffalo & Erie County Botanical Gardens](#) and [Niagara County Community College](#), dealt with the obvious deer question. Deer eat tulips. You want the pink of ‘Angelique’ tulips in Deer Land? Plant daffodils with peach or pink cups such as ‘Sentinel,’ ‘Vie en Rose’ and Pink Silk.’ Deer do not eat daffodils. For low-maintenance bulb care, Clark and Cooper both recommended against the ineffective and labor-intensive leaf braiding, and recommended bulb placement behind plants such as hostas that will block the view of the browning foliage.

Trouble comes as disease spores also. Both Hummel and Cooper recommended lilacs, phlox and Monarda that resist the classic end-of-season fungus. They added the value of good air circulation and uncrowding the plants – back to right sites for every species.

Design for Least Work

How you design the beds greatly influences how much work your landscape requires. In teaching eco-friendly gardening, I promote less lawn (if any) and layered planting, with trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses covering the ground. Not surprisingly, the beautifully photographed gardens in Cooper’s book are also layered, with great swaths of plants running into each other and little bare soil in sight.

Ultimately, experts concur that low-maintenance gardens are quite possible. And someday, just maybe, you will find yourself viewing yours from a hammock.

Sally Cunningham is a garden writer, lecturer and consultant.