

Creating a Garden For the “Mature” Gardener

BY SANDY PHELPS '02

Many of us are finding ourselves in a new phase of life. Some of us have suddenly become “single” again. Our bodies are aging and cannot bend or lift as we could when we were 50. Many of us are looking to downsize, to move to a smaller home: a smaller footprint inside and out that will give us an easier lifestyle. My research has pointed out several important elements that can be used as a guide in creating our new and improved home and garden.

Expanding interior space to outdoor spaces:

Most of us will move to a smaller, more manageable home. Interior rooms will be smaller than what we have now, yet we still want space to accommodate visits from our children and grandchildren. We will need to spill out into our new yards and create more exterior “rooms”. It is far easier and cheaper to expand outside rather than add on to interior spaces. Right outside the kitchen and dining room we can create a large “overflow” area for dining. This space must have convenient access to the kitchen and be large enough to walk around a table. Surrounding this main dining area there should be at least one “room” that is filled with comfortable chairs, for relaxing or chatting with guests.

Smooth transitions from one outdoor room to the next:

Solid paths should connect garden ‘rooms’ to one another and to the front of the house. A path should draw the eye as well as the feet to the destination. Perhaps the destina-

tion is a comfy chair, a shed or compost pile. Keep safety in mind when creating or reworking paths. Strive for paths with gentle slopes rather than steps. Remove old stepping-stones to prevent tripping and to avoid weeding. If you cannot replace the stepping-stones, fill the spaces in between with pea gravel and landscape fabric to promote drainage and prevent weeds. Make sure the path has a gentle slope to one side to prevent puddling. Paths and their edges should be marked clearly by changing paving materials when an elevation change is near. Border the edges of paths with pea gravel or low plants. Add good lighting along the paths if you plan on entertaining in the evenings.

Protection from the elements:

As we age we realize that too much exposure to the sun is harmful, and it is also easy to get dehydrated quickly. It is important to create shade in the garden with trees, arbors or pergolas. This ‘sheltering roof’ creates a sense of enclosure and invites one outside, to rest in the shade. If your garden has wide, open spaces, create a small oasis of shelter. It could be as easy as an umbrella over a table, or between chairs. Plant one small section of the yard with fast growing trees and set up a small sitting space to enjoy the garden in the shade.

The key to creating a better garden for the aging gardener is to make it easier to enjoy the garden for many years to come. Do not think in terms of what you once wanted, but what you can enjoy in the future.

Nancy Boney's Garden in Bedminster



Simplify, Simplify, Simplify:

Each element in the garden for the older gardener should have a purpose.

- Eliminate those unnecessary finicky plants that take too much water, care or pruning.
- Move thirsty plants closer to the water source to avoid moving heavy watering cans or hoses.
- Reduce the size of the lawn to a more manageable size but keep the mower for good exercise.
- Think in terms of plants that encourage birds to come and feast on the pests that eat up your plants.
- Cut back on the number of exotic plants in your garden. Select plants that are native to the area and are attractive to birds.
- Instead of picking up heavy bags of mulch each year from the big box stores or having to pay someone to deliver and spread mulch, think about getting a simple leaf mulcher. I have a lightweight model where I can pick up leaves and yard waste and mulch it right next to where I want to add mulch. Better yet, plant more ground cover to eliminate mulch altogether.
- A small, easy to turn composter should be on every aging gardener's list. This reduces the amount of food waste and creates compost that can feed your plants.