

Reduce garden maintenance with shrubs

Many of us are looking for ways to reduce the time spent maintaining of our landscapes. One of the easiest ways is to replace labor-intensive perennials – those requiring additional fertilizer or continual deadheading and drought-sensitive or disease-prone varieties – with small shrubs.

There are many pint-sized shrubs that require pruning just once a year, if at all. Some are evergreen; some relinquish their leaves for the winter. Some have spectacular blooms; some offer colorful foliage. Here are some of the best for northern Illinois gardens.

The glossy leaves of *Euonymus* ‘Canadale Gold’ sport bright yellow edges surrounding green centers. Because it is evergreen, its distinctive coloring adds interest to the landscape year round. It grows in an irregular mound about 3 feet tall and wide. It never has to be pruned, but does not mind a haircut if its gardener prefers a more manicured appearance. This shrub is not fussy about growing conditions and performs in sun to part shade in dry to moist soils, as long as they are not soggy.

Euonymus ‘Moonshadow’ boasts evergreen foliage with the opposite pattern of variegation of ‘Canadale Gold’ and grows a bit shorter – just 2 feet tall – but up to 4 feet wide.

Position *Euonymus* ‘Canadale Gold’ or ‘Moonshadow’ in the front of taller perennials that are ugly from the knees down like asters, daisies, goldenrods and mums.

One of my favorite shrubs, *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Bobo’ features an abundance of large white conical flowers held on strong, non-flopping stems beginning in mid-summer. In fall, the flowers take on rosy tones. The shrub grows just 30 inches tall and 36 inches wide and is happy to perform in sun to part shade in well-drained soil enriched with compost. Deadhead last year’s spent flowers in early spring.

Choose *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Bobo’ to replace daylilies that need daily deadheading.

Juniperus squamata ‘Blue Star’ is a lovely, ground-hugging evergreen shrub with silvery-blue needles. It reportedly up to 3 feet tall, but the specimen in my front garden can’t be over a foot tall, although it has reached 4 feet wide as expected. Junipers require a spot with well-drained soil and full sun. It never needs pruning and is drought-tolerant once established.

A Blue Star juniper takes the space of five perennials in my garden where it is planted with Zagreb coreopsis and Max Frei geranium.

Ninebarks became all the rage several years ago with the introduction of varieties showing off new foliage colors. *Physocarpus* ‘Tiny Wine’ is one of the newest members of the family. It features mildew-resistant, dark maroon foliage on bushy shrubs growing 3 to 4 feet tall. Pink flower buds open to charming white flowers in late spring. After dropping its leaves in fall, the exfoliating bark provides winter interest. Plant it in full sun to light shade in well-drained soil.

If you have peonies that come down with an annual bout of botrytis or old-fashioned phlox that are always covered with mildew, replace them with Tiny Wine ninebark. After it blooms in late spring, its dark, richly-colored foliage is a beautiful backdrop for smaller pink, red or yellow-flowering perennials.

Weigela 'My Monet' captures your heart at first glance. It's a cutie – just 18 inches tall and wide – with green foliage painted with strokes of cream and pink at the edges. Soft pink flowers begin blooming in spring and continue sporadically through summer. It grows in full sun to part shade in compost-amended, well-drained soil. It rarely, if ever, needs pruning.

Plant *Weigela* 'My Monet' in place of any small, time-consuming perennials at the front of the border like balloon flowers, blanket flowers, and perennial dianthus.

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