

LOW-MAINTENANCE ECO GARDENS

Small-Scale Solutions for a Healthier Planet

Fred Meyer & Jen Kardos

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHING TEAM

It's not often that a book comes to us with such a powerful message, and so brilliantly conveyed, that everyone is raving about it. But *Low-Maintenance Eco Gardens* and authors Fred Meyer and Jen Kardos are a true gem. We are so excited to bring this to you.

Your average garden book will present a reader with images of expansive lawns of vegetables and flowers, then describe all the work that goes into maintaining it. Endless hours spent tilling and weeding; high standards must be maintained when cultivating perfect plants and planning for colors and textures; arduous work is involved in building up compost, creating soil mixtures, and removing pests. For some, the results may be worth the effort. But for so many gardeners, this is not realistic. There isn't enough time in the day to maintain a picture-perfect yard, which turns our big plans into a constant reminder of regret.

We are inspired by Fred and Jen's approachable method to gardening. They help you nail down exactly what you want from your outdoor space and don't judge you for what that means or looks like. Do you only have a small balcony? *Sounds like the perfect spot to add a happy place!* Do you only want to spend a couple hours a week for maintenance? *Same here! No problem!* Is your garden overgrown? *Sometimes it's fun to let things get wild! But if you want to start over, that's also covered!*

What we love about this book is the focus on keeping your needs in mind. This might mean letting go of perfection. But it also means trying to find the joy in working in the garden! Nature is something we can, and should, enjoy. It can steady our minds and help settle the stress of the day in ways that other outlets might not. A garden doesn't need to be the best on the block—if you are happy, then that's all that matters!

Remember: Gardening should be all about **connection, not perfection**.

Once you have that mantra in mind, it's easy to incorporate these lessons into your everyday life. This book has plenty of information that will support you through every step of planning and working in your garden, providing detailed breakdowns on plants and projects. But what will stay with you is the joy that is encouraged in doing that work. What a special gift!

We hope you like *Low-Maintenance Eco Gardens* as much as we do. Happy gardening!

—EDITORS OF CREATIVE HOMEOWNER

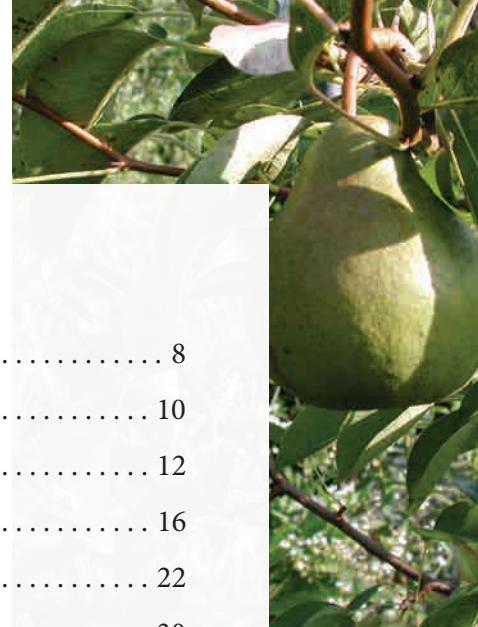
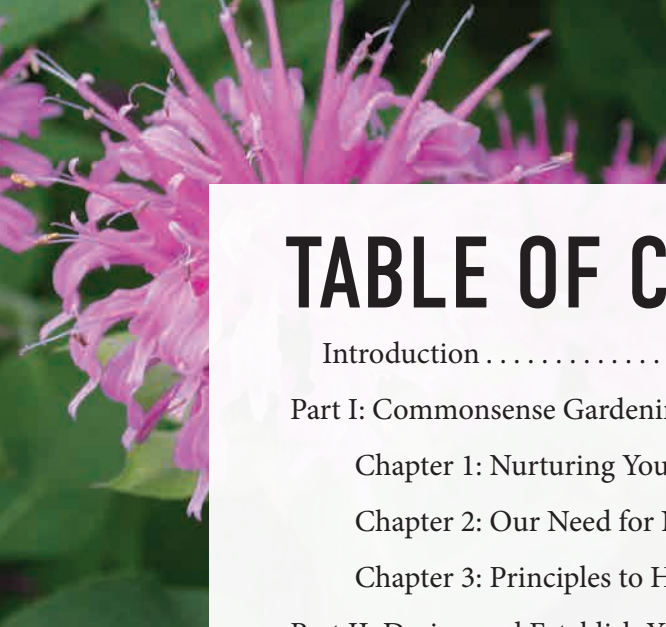
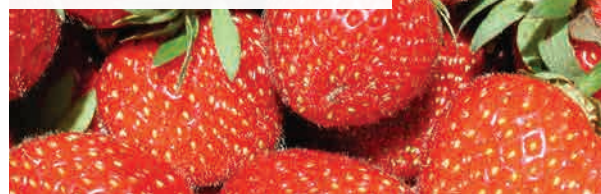


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	8
Part I: Commonsense Gardening for Us and Earth.	10
Chapter 1: Nurturing You and Your Garden	12
Chapter 2: Our Need for Nature	16
Chapter 3: Principles to Help Your Garden (and You) Thrive	22
Part II: Design and Establish Your Abundant Space	30
Chapter 4: Begin with a Sketch	32
Chapter 5: Align Your Garden with You	34
Chapter 6: Maximize Ease with Location and Layout	39
Chapter 7: Simple, Low-Maintenance Garden Spaces	52
Inspirational Garden Gallery	54
Part III: Manage Your Space with the Rhythms of Nature	132
Chapter 8: Nurture Your Garden While It Nurtures You	134
Chapter 9: Daily and Periodic Garden Tasks	143
Chapter 10: Naturally Address Common Pests and Diseases	170
Chapter 11: Evolve with Your Garden	175
Part IV: Meet Your New Best Friends	178
Chapter 12: Your Plant Matchmaking Guide	180
Chapter 13: Plant Profiles	206
Part V: Resources	260
Chapter 14: Garden Toolbox	262
Chapter 15: Materials Planning	265
Plant Hardiness Zone Map	276
About the Authors	278
Acknowledgments	280
Photo Credits	281
Further Reading	282
Index	284





12



16



22



32



34



39



52



134



143



170




175



180

INTRODUCTION



Something deep in you is tugging, nudging you to look up from your screen and sink your hands into what is truly important. As the world shifts in big, uncertain ways, many of us are yearning for steady ground—something we can grow, touch, and trust.

With more responsibilities and devices pulling at us than ever before, it's natural to wonder how we can return to simpler times—those we're reminded of when a cat lounges in the yard, when we wander through a farmers market, or when birdsong drifts in through an open window. Some quiet part inside still knows: it's time to get back in the garden, to feel more connected to the earth and its generous abundance.

How is it that every other creature on Earth gets all food directly from nature, while we sit at desks trying to earn enough to buy it in plastic from a store?

This book isn't about growing all your own food—though you will learn to grow food in ways that are enjoyable, satisfying, and nourishing. No high-maintenance crops here. It's also not solely about creating the perfect wildlife habitat for pollinators or birds—though you'll delight in the visitors you attract.

This book is about building a relationship with your yard, your balcony, or whatever patch of green you call your own, without stressing yourself out. It's about learning to garden in ways that rejuvenate you, while also making your space better for all who share it—human and nonhuman alike. This is a guide to growing connection, not perfection.

We (Fred and Jen) have spent years weaving together the practices of vegetable gardening, fruit orchards, wild edibles, and wildlife habitats, sharing what we've learned along the way. We've helped individuals and community spaces—like the Edible Classroom and GuideLink Center featured in this book—transform blank slates and weedy messes into interactive, abundant spaces that nourish both people and the planet.

Most of this work has unfolded over the past two decades through EarthMind Practice (formerly Backyard Abundance), a nonprofit connecting people with nature through engaging, hands-on experiences that build practical skills in ecological gardening, wilderness living, and everyday resilience while offering moments of calm, confidence, and reconnection. Fred teaches these principles as adjunct faculty at the University of Iowa, while Jen integrates her love of nature-based therapy into her work as a licensed mental health therapist.

We've worked in hundreds of spaces with thousands of clients and students, helping them build relationships with their eco gardens, grow food and habitats, and dramatically reduce the time it takes to maintain their landscapes. This book is the culmination of all that work. And with our background in education, we've done our best to make it as complete, accessible, and enjoyable as possible.

As our work has evolved—and as the pace of life continues to speed up—we've found that the calming, grounding power of time in nature is just as important as the food and flowers we grow. More than ever, people are feeling anxious, scattered, and overwhelmed. As certified Health and Wellness Coaches (NBC-HWC), we recognize the growing need for stress relief and meaningful reconnection with the natural world.

This is a unique perspective our book offers: an invitation to approach eco-garden tending as a way to cultivate peace, presence, and personal resilience alongside beauty and bounty.



DISCOVER HOW TO . . .

- **Adapt to Any Space:** Implement practical projects and flexible methods that cater to all garden sizes—from compact balconies to expansive yards—so you can cultivate abundance anywhere.
- **Simplify Maintenance:** Use proven strategies and easy-care plants to transform existing gardens or establish new ones, ensuring long-term success with minimal effort.
- **Blend Diverse Gardening Techniques:** Seamlessly integrate annual vegetable gardening, container planting, perennial orchards, and foraging to maximize yields and ease.
- **Embrace Realistic Practices:** Avoid the pitfalls of overambitious gardening promises. This guide provides honest advice, steering clear of high-maintenance plants and labor-intensive methods, focusing instead on enjoyment and practicality.
- **Cultivate Well-Being:** Experience the therapeutic benefits of gardening as a pathway to self-care and self-reliance, offering nourishment for the body, tranquility for the mind, and hope for the spirit.
- **Use Eco-Friendly, Organic Techniques:** Adopt simple, sustainable gardening practices that conserve resources, support beneficial wildlife, and create thriving ecosystems.
- **Enhance Aesthetic Appeal:** Create a productive, visually appealing garden that blends with your surroundings, whether you're aiming for neighborhood-friendly curb appeal or a private sanctuary.
- **Grow with Confidence:** All plant recommendations and techniques are tailored for USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 4–8, ensuring success in temperate climates with distinct seasons. Whether you're dealing with short growing seasons, unpredictable weather, or poor soil, you'll find practical solutions to help your garden thrive with ease.

We wish you joy and success in all your gardening endeavors. And if we can support you in transforming a container garden, a backyard, a community space, or even your inner landscape into a more living, connected place, please don't hesitate to reach out through the EarthMind Practice website: www.EarthMindPractice.org. We'd love to hear from you.



PART I:

COMMONSENSE GARDENING FOR US AND EARTH



Before any seeds are sown or containers are filled, it helps to pause and reimagine what gardening can be. This section invites you to shift your perspective—from gardening as a list of tasks to gardening as a relationship. By blending ancestral wisdom, modern insights, and nature's own rhythms, you'll create a space that nurtures the land alongside your body, mind, and spirit.

CHAPTER 01: NURTURING YOU AND YOUR GARDEN



Just steps from the back door, this patio of containers overflows with thriving herbs and greens—proof that a beautiful, productive garden doesn’t require perfection, extra time, or a big yard. Everything you see here is within easy reach, and this book will show you exactly how to create it.

If you have a garden—whether it’s for flowers, food, or both—it probably feels like it constantly demands attention. “Weed me. Water me. Prune me. Mulch me.” The excitement of spring planting has long faded, and now gardening feels like another task on your to-do list. So, you reluctantly don your hat and gloves, gather your tools, and haul the hose to that distant weedy, needy patch. Another long afternoon of work passes, and instead of feeling rejuvenated, you feel like you’re fighting with your garden rather than enjoying it.

Autumn brings slower growth and a sigh of relief. As unharvested tomatoes rot on browning vines, you wonder: “Was all that effort really worth it?” You harvested a few flowers, some cucumbers, and maybe a handful of beans, but nothing close to what you’d hoped. Where was the joy promised in books and online posts?

Maybe you’ve thought:

“I just don’t have a green thumb.”

“I don’t have enough time to keep up with it.”

“Gardening is supposed to be relaxing, but this feels like work.”

If any of this sounds familiar, you’re not alone—and this book is for you.

Gardening can be a source of nourishment, beauty, and peace, rather than being tiresome. Imagine stepping outside and being greeted by a flourishing garden that practically takes care of itself. You harvest fresh food with ease, watch butterflies dance among the flowers, and feel a deep sense of connection with the earth—without being overwhelmed by upkeep.

With this book, you’ll learn to design, establish, and enjoy a garden that gives back more than it takes—one that brings lasting satisfaction, feeds both body and soul, and invites you into ease rather than burdening you with work. Whether you have a small balcony, a suburban yard, or a larger homestead, you’ll find practical, time-saving solutions to create a beautiful space that rejuvenates you.

An Approach to Abundance and Ease

Gardening is meant to be a source of nourishment and joy—but too often, it becomes a struggle. We’ve been taught that successful gardens require constant watering, weeding, fertilizing, and pest control. These high-maintenance methods dominate many farms, public spaces, and even backyard gardens, making it easy to assume that only effort will equal success.

But nature doesn’t garden that way. In the wild, forests flourish, meadows bloom, and wildlife helps create balance, all without human intervention. This book will show you how to borrow from nature’s wisdom to create thriving, low-maintenance gardens.

This nature-inspired approach—often called permaculture—isn’t complicated; it’s simply common sense that’s rarely put into practice. Small shifts in how you design, plant, and care for your space will lead to a garden that grows to be more abundant and enjoyable every year.

WHAT YOU WILL GAIN

Whether you’re starting fresh or refining an existing space, this book will help you:

- **Make Gardening Easier:** Use proven, low-maintenance techniques to reduce weeding, watering, and pest issues.
- **Grow More with Less Effort:** Increase yields of food, fun, and beauty, creating a garden that nourishes you without exhausting you.
- **Improve Your Local Ecosystems:** Create a haven for pollinators, beneficial insects, and birds using organic, nature-based practices that improve soil health and biodiversity.
- **Turn Your Garden into a Retreat:** Create a space that reduces anxiety and brings stability, offering a place of calm and renewal during uncertain times.
- **Fit Gardening into Your Life:** Implement scalable, flexible strategies that work with your time, budget, and energy levels—whether you have a balcony, patio, backyard, or homestead.



A single raised bed, thoughtfully planted, yields an abundant harvest of Swiss chard—no tilling, no perfectionism, and no overwhelming feeling. With nature as your partner and a few simple shifts in approach, this kind of abundance becomes your new normal.

WHY THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

No matter your experience level, this book will help you grow with confidence.

For New Gardeners: No experience? No problem. You will get up to speed quickly with easy, low-maintenance methods that don’t require special skills or expensive tools. Each project includes clear, step-by-step instructions to guide you from planning to harvest, even if you’ve never grown anything before. Everything is broken down into manageable, rewarding tasks to ensure success from the start.

For Experienced Gardeners: Already love gardening but tired of labor-intensive upkeep? You’ll learn smart, time-saving techniques by adopting nature’s principles and rhythms. Your garden will become more self-sustaining, resilient, and abundant so you can spend less time maintaining and more time enjoying.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You don't need to read this book cover to cover. Think of it as a handy gardening companion that you can turn to at any time—whether you're planning a new area, tweaking a garden that isn't working, or looking for ways to reconnect with nature. You'll find creative ideas, practical projects, and flexible guidance that fits your time, space, and energy. Your needs will shift over time, and this book is here to grow with you.

- **Low-Maintenance, High-Reward Projects:** Discover tried-and-true garden setups that countless gardeners have needed, requested, and loved. These simple, effective designs make it easy to grow food, create beauty, and establish a thriving garden.
- **Practical and Clear:** Every project includes simple, step-by-step instructions, along with materials lists, troubleshooting tips, and shortcuts to ensure success.
- **Hands-On and Actionable:** No abstract theory—just real-world examples and time-tested techniques you can apply right away.
- **Designed for Real Life:** Quick-reference sections make it easy to find what you need, when you need it, without reading cover to cover.
- **Flexible and Customizable:** No rigid schedules or one-size-fits-all methods. Adaptable techniques fit your space, time, and budget, so your garden works for you—not the other way around.

This is more than just a gardening book—it's a guide to a simpler, more abundant way of living. By using proven, low-maintenance strategies, you'll create a space that feeds your body, nurtures your mind, and supports the environment, without exhausting yourself in the process. By adopting these practices, you'll find fulfillment in watching your garden—and yourself—flourish.



Harvesting fruit like these sparkling gumi berries is part of a more flexible, nourishing approach to gardening—one that blends veggies, berries, herbs, and even wild edibles into a space shaped by your needs and lifestyle. This book helps you design a garden that works for your time, your space, and the way you live.



Planting becomes a fun, shared moment when the garden is designed for connection, not perfection. This book invites the whole family into a simpler way of growing that supports well-being, learning, and togetherness.

CHOOSE YOUR STARTING POINT

Start wherever makes the most sense for your current goals, energy level, or season of life.



Want to dig into a new garden now? Head to “Simple, Low-Maintenance Garden Spaces” (page 52) and choose a step-by-step garden project that excites you.

Need to align your garden with your life? Check out “Manage Your Space with the Rhythms of Nature” (page 134), where you’ll find seasonal care guides and simple, mindful maintenance strategies.

Prefer to plan before planting? Visit “Design and Establish Your Abundant Space” (page 30) to explore site considerations, sketch a layout, and ensure everything is set up for long-term ease.

Unsure what to grow? Flip to “Meet Your New Best Friends” (page 178) for the Plant Matchmaking Guide, which will help you choose resilient, low-maintenance plants that bring joy without extra work.

Do you sense something deeper behind the urge to garden? “Our Need for Nature” (page 16) explores why conventional gardening often feels overwhelming and how working with nature—rather than struggling against it—can bring ease, resilience, and deeper connection to your space.