

## OUT ON A LIMB

‘Revitalizing an old garden’

By: Roger Davis, Landscape Architect  
Davis Design Group, Augusta, Georgia

What do you do with an aging garden? Gardens are dynamic, ever changing as plants grow and mature and environmental conditions change.

A common problem is that the lawn is now too shady to grow grass or at least the grass that was originally planted. Shrubs have overgrown their location and the plantings look tired and outdated. Sometimes, its just time to update. If you were going out, would you go into your closet and pull out a 20 year old suit when a recently purchased garment is available? There are many new exciting cultivars on the market that weren't available years ago.

To restore the grass the first thing to consider is thinning and/or raising the tree canopy or removing some trees to provide more light to the ground area. When the tree growth in a garden area is overgrown, the entire area looks dim and dingy. With proper tree pruning, the area can become brighter and be a more pleasant space for outdoor living. The second consideration is to change grass variety. What once was Bermuda, now may need to be St. Augustine or Zoysia to withstand the more shaded conditions that presently exist. Limit foot traffic and mow 1/3 higher. Mossy areas are unfavorable conditions for grass and should be removed. If the moss has a lot of coverage, many times it's better to promote the growth of the moss in lieu of removal. Frequently remove leaves and grass clippings to allow more light to reach the turf. If the area gets less than four hours of sunlight it is too shady for grass. I've found that if there are a lot of exposed tree roots, no grass, or not even any weeds, its probably too shady for grass altogether and you need to consider a groundcover or just a mulch bed. Ground covers that might be acceptable are: Bugleweed – *Ajuga reptans*, English Ivy (*Hedra helix*), Asiatic jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*) or Purpleleaf wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei coloratus*). In areas more north of us, bluegrass or fescue might be the answer to your shade problem, however they are not permanent in our area. By the way, I hate St. Augustine with its fungus and chinch bug problems that can wipe you out almost overnight. Zoysia if not too shady, is a better choice.

If the grass is not doing well and shade is not the problem, it may need to be aerated due to soil compaction over the years. Always obtain a soil test to determine the chemical needs of the turf, aerate in the spring and fertilize as recommended by the soil test throughout the growing season.

Shade can also affect the plantings that were once intended for full sun. The plants, in the shade, tend to get 'leggy' and try to grow toward the light and no amount of pruning will correct this condition. Only replacement with a more shade tolerant variety is the solution.

Many times shrubs have been allowed to overgrow and are blocking the house. You can convert an overgrown shrub to a multi-stem tree by raising the canopy to expose the trunks and possibly by removing some of the stems at the base allowing you to under plant with a smaller growing shrub. Sometimes the plantings are so overgrown and poorly planned to begin with, it will look better to prune them down or remove them altogether to be able to start anew.

Space doesn't allow me to go into all of the plant updates but I'll name a few that have dominated the market. Loropetalum is a plant with its green foliage and white flowers which has been improved, giving us burgundy foliage and fuchsia flowers, even some with red flowers, such as Zhuzhou Fuchia, Daruma and Ever Red. The green varieties now come in much smaller sizes such as Carolina Moonlight and Snow Muffin. Sizes of Loropetalum now range from 15-20' down to 18". The 'Encore' azaleas have been propagated to give us two seasons of flower, spring & fall and some will tolerate full sun as well. Never have I seen so many Hydrangea introductions and one of our local wholesale nurseries lists over 70 different cultivars. There are Hydrangeas now available that bloom off of the old and new wood making the time of pruning less critical for next season blooming. The cultivars of Distylium are varied and grow in varies sizes from 2-3' to 15'. The plants are evergreen and will tolerate degrees of moisture that other plants can't.

If you are going to stay in you present location, you might want to modernize that tired looking landscape.

As any plastic surgeon will tell you, 'A good facelift makes you look fresh and much younger' although the new planting might be less expensive.