

Garden chores, for better or worse

By the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Most gardeners want to spend time outdoors and prefer garden chores to indoor ones. But even the most hardcore gardeners have yard chores they, well, “enjoy” less than others. What are the worst chores, and what ones are most enjoyable? An informal survey revealed a surprising amount of consensus.

Least Pleasurable Garden Chores

Weeding tops the list of the most-hated garden chores, or at least makes it into everyone’s Top 10. Words like endless, never-ending and overwhelming were common adjectives. It’s a matter of focus also; to go out and weed demands attention not to the beauty of the garden but to its bullies.

Dealing with other bullies in the form of pests and diseases isn’t something we enjoy either. But more and more gardeners are allowing nature to take care of things on its own. With beneficial insects outnumbering true pests by something like 97 percent, that’s not a bad choice.

Chores connected specifically to lawn or turf weren’t highly enjoyed; mowing in particular, with raking taking a close second in the off-season. Edging, aerating and other lawn chores join their ranks.

There appears to be a strong bias against “noisy” tasks, ones that require power equipment like mowers, edgers and chainsaws. Power-driven chores consistently ranked in the least-enjoyed category. Silence, it would appear, truly is golden to gardeners. Cleaning, sharpening and maintaining equipment is something we’d prefer to avoid too.

Fall clean-up isn’t relished nearly as much as spring planting; and digging up dahlias, gladiolas or other non-hardy plants doesn’t have the immediate gratification gardeners get from bringing live plants in for the winter.

Not surprisingly, jobs that are beyond the gardener’s level of expertise are disliked. Testing soil was one of those things gardeners felt guilty about not doing, along with composting. One gardener wrote, “compost! (there, I said it. I used to. Too much work! Takes up space. I just throw compostable yard waste behind large plants, let it rot and forget about it.)”

The truth is, if we’re throwing waste back into the landscape, we are composting, and even if we’re not testing our soil but are planting into it and adding organic material to it, it’s going to improve. So maybe we can relax about some of these.

Most Enjoyable Garden Chores

There are unifying factors for the chores gardeners enjoy, too. They tend to be tasks that are less repetitive, less physically demanding, hand- rather than power-tooled and allow for a good bit of creativity.

Designing and deciding what to plant and then gathering the plants is highly pleasurable for most gardeners, a chance to think about color, texture and different seasons. It takes place in the imagination before the harsh realities of wind, heat and hard work tarnish the original vision.

Doing the actual planting is enjoyable for most gardeners, too, whether in containers or in the landscape.

Deadheading is a task many gardeners enjoy. Unlike weeding, it focusses on successes, giving its caretaker a chance to pay attention to plants that have bloomed and borne and fulfilled their mission. Watering lands on either end of the scale: hauling hoses and setting sprinklers is no fun but hand-watering containers, for many gardeners, is.

Laying stone walls or pathways is physical work but it can make an almost immediate difference. Pruning woody plants and cutting back ornamental grasses is another “could go either way” task. If these things haven’t been done by late spring when everything needs attention all at once, they add to the duties. During winter months, though, they give gardeners a chance to be productive outdoors.

So give a little thought to the things you don’t want to do: add more plants (pro) close together to avoid weeding (con); prune on a mild winter day (pro) rather than a busy, rainy spring day (con); and plant shrubs (pro) in patches of the lawn that are difficult to mow.