

# Lower-Cost Gardening: Tips From Kenyon St. Garden Walks



The Kenyon Street Garden Walk folks trade secrets and plants.

## West End Conditions:

*Hartford is zone 6. Connecticut soil is generally on the acid side. The West End yard is likely to have clay soil. Most yards here have wet areas, but dry areas under the house overhangs or dense shrubs and trees. On average, it rains 1" a month - ideal for most plants, but specific weeks can greatly exceed that or have no rain, when you'll have to water. Planting for trees is ideal in April-May and mid- September, and October. Plant shrubs, annuals and perennials in May or very early June. Plant shrubs, lawns and some perennials in mid- September, October and early November. Spring bulbs go in October and early-November (or in a pinch, as long as the ground can be dug).*

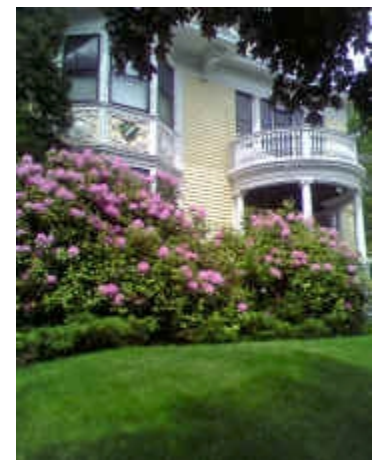
## First Things First

### 1. **Focus on the front first - Maintenance!**

If it's perfectly maintained, whatever you have looks better. Cut the lawn, edge the beds, pull the weeds, shape the shrubs (paint the wood steps).

### 2. **Keep what you have and improve it.**

An overbearing tree can be limbed from the bottom to frame your house



and provide light and air. It took decades for that mature tree to grow. Keep the advantages: a cooler house, cleaner air and more inviting walk - just limb it, don't kill it.

Prune shrubs that have gotten gangly, too dense or oversized. Arborvitae, rhodies, azaleas, privet - in fact most shrubs can be heavily pruned to solve a problem. Don't forget that the large lower branches of shrubs can be beautifully sculptural if exposed by removing foliage that will give you more space and sunshine, but keep the living plant. If you want more color, consider leaving the evergreens (pruned back) and expanding the bed in front to plant colorful annuals and perennials.

Move it. If you have a tree, shrub or perennial hiding in the back, move it to a better, more visible spot. If you can do this yourself, it's dirt cheap. If not, compare the cost (and risk) of moving it, to purchasing another large plant that you'll have to wait for it to mature.

### 3. **Hanging Baskets** and **Create a Focal Point**.



A couple of well-placed hanging baskets, planting boxes or urns out front (or in the back) can make a big impact for little cost and maintenance. For the most impact, choose annuals that have massed bright color that look spectacular next to your house color. Choose flowers that bloom all summer, or switch once from spring to summer blooms. Create a focal point. If your eye travels right to a certain spot, all of the other areas fade into the background. Two planting urns like these create a focal point.

Or you can place a bench or bird feeder with a mulched bed and few well-placed plants around it. Put it where you want the eye to be drawn. Your yard will seem more complete with the addition of only a few plants surrounding a focal point. You can do the same with a tree. Pick the

most decorative or important tree in your yard, and make it a focal point by adding a chair, artifact or swing. Completing it with a couple of well-chosen plants will make it stand out.

Color or combinations of color can provide a focal point. A well-placed tree or shrub that lights up the colors around it pulls your eye so that lots of plant material become unnecessary. The same can be said of dramatic spring-flowering trees and shrubs. If you can choose a specimen with plum colored leaves year-round, you'll have that effect year-round.



## **Choosing Plants**

### 1. **Be Patient**.

Plant the tree, shrub, perennial that will fit (with space in between) when it's mature. Make sure you ask how tall and how wide your plant will be at maturity. You can always fill in with a few large low cost annuals or perennials in the early years.

2. **Choose plants that will thrive in your light and soil conditions.**

It will die immediately (or peter out) if you don't put a plant designed for the spot. Most people do the opposite - they buy what they love, and then hope they have a spot for it.

- Lots of tree roots? - only a few ground covers and plants will make it.
- Clay soil? - Amend with lots of compost, sand, etc. or most plants will die. Plants for clay.
- A large overhang where rainwater never reaches? - better plant drought-tolerant plants that don't need a lot of moisture (lavender and lupine, are examples).
- A fully shaded area? - plant a big leafed hosta with smaller ones of varied color. They're hard to kill, and they come in lots of sizes and leaf colors. These large blue hosta create a defining border to the wooded area beyond. Or mix it up with other shade choices like coral bells, brunnera or fern. Perennials for full shade. Impatients, New Guinea impatients, and coleus are annuals of choice for full shade.
- A low spot that's wet much of the time? - You should solve it, if you can (it's not going to get dryer on its own). Or plant what wants to be there anyway. Plants for Wet Areas more
- Moss under that tree? - Make areas under a tree or shady lawn areas that are already mostly moss fully a moss area - you already know the conditions are right. In short, go with what works. Plants for Special Needs



3. **Choose fewer large or fast-growing plants.**



For new plantings, choose fewer large plants to fill up a large space. If they have long-running blooms or fall color that compliment your house color and style, so much the better. Rhododendrons, mountain laurel and hydrangea 'endless summer' are some examples of shrubs.

Plant fast-spreading care-free perennials (if you have a bed that can contain them). This

handsome arbor (made from stock items from Home Depot) is supporting just four Sweet Autumn Clematis plants that matured within 2 or 3 years after planting. Echinacea, bee-balm, daylilies, perennial geraniums such as 'Rosanne', are some examples of fast-growing perennials that have concentrated color and nice size. See Perennial All-Stars for lists and information.



4. **Choose long-lived plants that aren't susceptible to disease.**

Annuals are only good for a year (save these for well-placed punch and pay attention to the specific variety. For example, Tidal Wave petunias can provide a mass explosion of color from just a plant or two. Regular petunias do not.) Or choose self-seeding annuals

that will grow next year from their own seeds. NOTE: Do not deadhead at the end of the season, or you won't get seeds. You will have to transplant 'volunteers' that fall where they may. Or collect the seeds in an envelope (label it) and spread them where you want them in the fall.



Bulbs can naturalize and spread or only last a season. If you want them to keep coming, plant naturalizing daffodils, hyacinth, snow drops. Tulips only last a year (or less if the squirrels get them) - some of the tall "Impression" and early "Kaufmannia" tulips can last two or three years. Crocus can last a long time, but only where the squirrels can't get them - like under the grass. Hint: wherever you plant a ground cover, plant daffs underneath. Mine have lasted decades without maintenance. You can surround your tasty tulips with daffs, which are poisonous to squirrels.

Perennials can live for a century or more (certain roses, peonies, for example). These lilies, Echinacea, astilbe and lamium form a terraced border that has been here over 25 years - quite maintenance-free. Some perennials only live a couple of seasons (violas, columbine). Here's a info on long lived perennials.



Shrubs. Most shrubs are long-lived if put in the right spot for light, water and soil conditions.

Trees. Short-lived trees can live for only 10 years, especially if they are susceptible to disease. (Lombardy Poplar which grows fast, Mountain Ash, for example). I have seen both of these grow and die with the same owner who planted them for screening. The owner could have planted a less expensive shrub or vine that would still be screening the desired area long after those poplars died.



Here was a short, mature grape arbor that was just put on a taller arbor to provide the height of screening these owners desired. Grapes are so vigorous; it filled in to the new height that same year.

Smaller ornamental trees such as Dogwood have a normal life of 30 years and can be susceptible to disease. A Japanese Maple of the same height can live for hundreds of years. Here are trees to avoid. Recommended Street Trees.

# Beg, Buy or Plant Low-Cost

## 1. Join or form a garden group.

The cheapest plants are from your own yard - or are given by a friend or relative. Ask for a division, seedling or cutting if you see a plant you like! Both these large orange cannas and the elephant ears came from divided plants from another Kenyon St. gardener. They filled nearly the entire new front bed.

Learn to divide those perennials: how and when. You're going to have to divide most of them anyway. When your perennial plants start to peter out, or get a dead spot in the center of a clump, it means they are too crowded and are beginning to die. Decide ahead of time where the extras are going to go: make a new or expanded bed, have an overflow bed for cut flowers, give them away, sell them, or gasp! compost them if they're not diseased.



## 2. Plant from Seed.



### Learn what you can root.

Collect seeds from yours and others plants - or pop for the \$2.35 and buy a packet of seeds. March is usually seed-starting time here, so you'll need to think about where to start them. Start with the easy ones - like sunflower seeds or marigolds.

This giant sunflower was grown from seed. [Best Annual Flowers to Start from Seed](#) [Best Flowers to Start from Seed](#)

### Rooting Plants

## 3. Buy plants in bulk at discount prices.

Don't need that discounted collection of 100 bulbs, but two or three of you are interested? There's a 30% discount if you buy three? Get a friend. Discount catalogues can be a good deal, but may not be. Get recommendations from your friends.

## 4. Find a charity plant sale - or have one yourself!



Many school fairs and community organizations sell plants as a part of their fundraiser. May Fair at Noah Webster School usually has a plant sale table.

Or, use all those pots you collect to pot up your extra perennials (Clean pots with 10% bleach solution first). Tell all your friends the sale date, and donate the proceeds to charity. Convince your friends to join you, and you can buy *their* plants at discount. One group sells every year and donates the funds to cancer research.

# Sources for Low-Cost

(Hartford)

1. **Knox Parks Foundation Street Tree Planting.**

Your group supplies the labor, Knox supplies the trees, material and heavy equipment. This group is planting a Bradford Pear on Knox's tree planting day on Kenyon St. in 2006. This is one of 25 trees planted that day.



2. **Free compost at Hartford Public Works**

May and early June, go to the public works yard off of Jennings Road near Riverside Park during business hours. You shovel it and truck it. Bring old laundry baskets, leaf bags, etc. They'll usually be able to help load your car.

3. **Make your own compost.**

Local sites can tell you how. You need to turn it every week or so and have a spot.

4. **Tag Sales, Craig's List, FreeCycle, Trash Day**

Get free or cheap garden ornaments, pots, furniture, plants, etc. by being observant.

5. **Elizabeth Park and Knox Parks both sell discounted plants.**



Check times in the Elizabeth Park calendar for their sales of: Bulbs (April & June), Perennials (May), Dahlia Bulbs (May), Iris and Herbs (May). Check the Knox website for their perennial plant sale.

6. **Grocery stores and discount sources.**

If you know what you want, check out the prices at the grocery store - right when they first come out. These stores hold on to their stock and usually don't have the staff or expertise to keep the plants healthy for long.

7. **Buy in late fall.**

Most garden centers discount healthy trees and shrubs later in the fall - when it is still the best time to plant. Most discount annuals and perennials in June-July. Ask if you can have that plant that fell off the truck. If it's damaged and can't be sold, some will let you have it free, or heavily discounted. Or find a friend who works at one.....

8. **Stores that have a 100% guarantee on all material.**

Home Depot and Lowe's both refund 100% if your tree, shrub, perennial or annual doesn't make it. Ask at your garden center - keep receipts, and then take the trouble to ask for the refund.