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## Reduce Maintenance in the Enchanted Landscape

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In the 1975 movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur and his band are blocked by the dreaded Knights Who Say “Ni!” in an enchanted forest.

“Bring me a shrubbery,” demands the giant Knight, adding, “One that looks nice...And not too expensive.”

King Arthur delivers a shrubbery after a short (hilarious) quest, but the Knight demands another. He specifies it must be “only slightly higher, so we get the two-level effect with a little path running down the middle.” Does that sound like some plant buyers you know?

King Arthur eventually gallops away unharmed, but what about the shrubs? The forest may be enchanted, but this gnarly knight failed to research which plants were right for the place.

After the first growing season, he will likely be wondering why the leaves are turning brown. Perhaps he’ll call the UConn Home and Garden Center for advice at 877-486-6271 or email them at [ladybug@uconn.edu](mailto:ladybug@uconn.edu).

Maybe he’ll send diseased leaf samples to the plant diagnostics center at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven or Windsor ([CT.gov/CAES](http://CT.gov/CAES)).

He’ll spend a season or two trying to save the plants with fungicides and bug sprays. He’ll rake away the dead leaves and prune dying branches. By the following year, he’ll give up in frustration, and the “shrubberies” will meet their fate in the chipper. By skipping that early research, the Knight encountered a lot of extra plant care and still got a bad result.

Sound like anyone you know?

The lesson? It is not enough to say, “I need something that blocks my view of the neighbor’s driveway, something deer won’t eat.” If you want to reduce landscape maintenance, good plant selection is key.

Rachel Blundon Klein of Madison Earth Care in North Madison puts it this way: “There is no such thing as a garden that has tons of flowers all the time, requires absolutely no work, and costs nothing to plant.”

She adds, “We are working with living things and with Mother Nature. We cannot control everything.”

Yes, research is required. Luckily, much help is available.

Use the UConn plants database ([plants.uconn.edu](http://plants.uconn.edu)), for instance, which offers almost 30 selection criteria for trees and shrubs. Enter the “search by traits” section of the database and use the “site characteristics” section to find good matches. Use the “special qualities” section to look for deer resistance.

If deer resistance is of special concern, try Rutgers’ “Landscape Plants Rated by Deer Resistance” at [njaes.rutgers.edu/deer-resistant-plants](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deer-resistant-plants).

For ornamental grasses and flowering plants, use the University of Rhode Island’s native plant database, [web.uri.edu/rinativeplants](http://web.uri.edu/rinativeplants). It offers seven selection criteria.

Want to know if the plant is a hyper-local native? Use [GoBotany.NewEnglandWild.org](http://GoBotany.NewEnglandWild.org).

The “Find Plants” page at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center ([www.wildflower.org/plants](http://www.wildflower.org/plants)) combines trees, shrubs, flowering plants, and all other types. Each plant page is rich with plant care information.

Are you looking for groundcovers? Try the databases at Jeeper’s Creepers ([www.jeeperscreepers.info](http://www.jeeperscreepers.info)), Stepables ([stepables.com](http://stepables.com)), or Treadwell ([www.treadwellplants.com](http://www.treadwellplants.com)). All three offer ways to find local retailers.

Don’t forget books with a regional focus for local hints that can make a big difference. For instance, I recall the time I learned that plants rated for shade in the south might require full sun when you move to Vermont. (See *The Shady Lady’s Guide to Northeast Shade Gardening* by Amy Ziffer, University Press of New England, 2014.)

Finally, visit owner-operated garden centers with knowledgeable staff.

Bill Harris, one of the owners at Acer Gardens in Deep River, says, “The extreme amount of diversity in the ornamental plant world is endless. Sometimes the answers aren’t as simple as we might like. But if you bring your curiosity, we’ll always try to help you find a plant and a plan that will work.”

Have fun doing your homework. And the next time you meet King Arthur in the woods, please tell him I said hello.

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