



In a shady landscape, the white blooms on trillium stand out.

Sustainably Scenic

Story and photos by Gail Brown Hudson

With planning, a landscape can be lovely and low maintenance, even in shade.

"I won't have a plant [that requires a lot of water] because I'm not going to water it." Tough words from Fred Rozumalski, a well-known Twin Cities landscape architect, ecologist and horticulturist, especially since he's talking about his shade garden with sandy soil.

And yet, Rozumalski's garden is not only sustainable but features show-stopping blooms, a beautiful mix of foliage textures and unusual native plants, all of which look great all season long. His

small Minneapolis yard dazzles with everything from a colorful display of martagon lilies to a brilliantly white paper birch grove.

How does he do it? "This garden is my experimental ground on plants," he says. "It's got to look good and it's got to be low maintenance. What is it that can grow without a lot of attention? And by that, I mean, without a lot of fertilizers and pesticides." Rozumalski maintains that by mowing, spreading synthetic

Right: In his backyard, Fred Rozumalski keeps lawn to a minimum and frames it with stone-walls. *Center:* Rozumalski; toad lilies thrive in shade.

fertilizer and pumping water, many gardeners have created landscapes that are detrimental to the environment, instead of something that's natural, beautiful and functioning ecologically.

The benefits of sustainable landscapes are great: "We have *one* opportunity to sequester carbon, the one way we can do that is in our landscapes," he says. "We can't pull carbon out of the atmosphere any other way."

Some of Rozumalski's accomplishments include creating and implementing sustainable landscape plans for Macalester College in St. Paul, the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph and the Minnetonka City Hall, and designing the wetland restoration of the Spring Peeper Meadow at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

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Grow for the Conditions

The first step in developing a sustainable landscape is simple. Look at the conditions, he advises. "Understand your soil, understand your moisture levels and understand the light levels," he says. "That's where you start, always." Then, go to the nursery and buy plants with those conditions in mind. Ask specifically for plants for dry shade or plants to compete with tree roots or whatever your conditions are.

Rozumalski's garden has sandy loam soil, which means it will quickly drain excess water but can't hold significant amounts of water or nutrients. That's why he won't plant anything that's a wetland fringe plant. "If I had heavier soil, I'd be looking at a lot more species," he says.

Developing water conservation strategies is all about understanding how the water flows over your property—where it soaks in, where it does not—along





with selecting the right plants and good mulching, he says. But he knows gardeners are often tempted to buy thirsty plants anyway. “Look at the tag, try it if you want, and if you have to water it too much, let it go,” he says.

Rozumalski also improves water retention by mulching his entire yard with several inches of Cowsmo, a composted manure-based soil amendment. It adds nutrients to the soil and the dark mulch color makes plants stand out.

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Design with Less Lawn

One of the first things Rozumalski recommends for designing a sustainable yard is to consider shrinking the lawn, since turf soaks up lots of resources (water, fertilizer, pesticides). “I have a turf major and I don’t have anything against lawn,” he says. “We just plant so much that we don’t use ... there are other ways you can accommodate neatness through a lot less lawn.”

To make sure native plants appear tidy rather than weedy, Rozumalski suggests gardeners create a visual frame, with a

Opposite page, top: Structure keeps Rozumalski's garden looking neat.
Center: Wild aster; European wild ginger;
Bottom: Variegated sedge (*Carex*)

border of lawn or some kind of structure. In his yard, for example, it's a small square of red fescue turfgrass with a low stone wall. Red fescue is easy on the environment, too, requiring less water, mowing and fertilizer than other turf varieties.

He repurposed the previous homeowner's cement patio by breaking it up and making paths that wind through large areas of plantings and guide visitors from the front all the way to the alley behind the house.

"I like it a little wild-looking," he says. "I know overall it looks really nice, at least in my eyes, and I've done enough to create framing—like the walls and beautiful walks. I keep them swept. It can look just fine, always."

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A Shady Grove

In a neglected side garden, Rozumalski achieved structure by planting a grove of white paper birch trees. Then he interplanted them with many white and soft-colored blooming natives and nonnatives, such as a peach-colored bishop's hat (*Epimedium x warleyense*), white bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis* 'Alba'), white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*), white trillium, pink foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), periwinkle lungwort and a little bit of dark green hosta with white edging.

Low Maintenance

You might think a garden filled with so many different kinds of plants would require many hours of work every week through the season. But Rozumalski thinks of himself as a "lazy gardener."

"This landscape is very low maintenance," he says. "It's almost embarrassing how little I've done here."

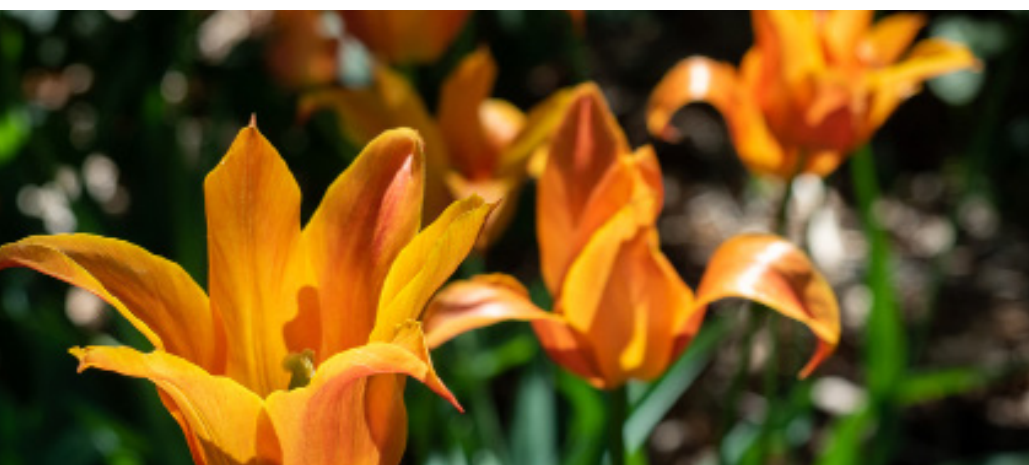


Top: White primula
Center: The patio is surrounded by plants, including these pink peonies that bloom in June.
Left: Foam flower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) adds soft color and texture.

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Top: Martagon lilies brighten the garden in June.
Center: Ballerina tulips add warmth in spring.
Bottom: Solomon seals adapt beautifully to dry shade. This is *Polygonatum odoratum* 'Chollipo'.



In early spring, he mows the whole perennial garden in a half an hour. "I fire up the lawn mower and the ground is often still frozen," he says. "As soon as the snow melts, I run the lawn mower over everything. I chop it and everything is just left there."

Then he weeds (mainly tree seedlings) around the emerging plants, adds mulch, and the job is pretty much done for the season, except for sweeping the paths when they need it.

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Plant Selection

This is the perfect environment for plants that do well in a dry shade garden. Among them are many unusual varieties of Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum*), a USDA Zone 3-hardy, easy-to-grow plant with arching branches. "There's something about the texture and there's enough variegation and variety in them," he says. "They really are drought tolerant and they hold their form really nicely."

One of Rozumalski's favorite Solomon's seals, which may turn into one of yours, too, is 'Angel Wings' (zone 4a). This eye-catching variety throws light into dark areas of the garden, with its extra-wide, creamy leaf edge, blushing maroon stems and tiny, fragrant blossoms. He combines it with 'Purple Palace' coralbells (*Heuchera micrantha* 'Palace Purple') for contrast in color and texture.

Another drought-tolerant plant that holds its form is the gray-green Japanese painted fern 'Brandford Beauty' and the red-stemmed variety 'Lady in Red' (*Athyrium*), which is hardy to zone 3. Rozumalski says these plants shine all the way into the fall. "I go, 'OK, if you're still looking good, you're a winner!'"

But the star performer in this garden is the extremely showy and exotic-looking martagon lily. Rozumalski grows

Right: A birch grove fills the side yard.
Below: White trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*)

many varieties, and in June, their Turk's cap-shaped flowers sparkle and sway above the rest of the garden in orange, red and white. The final stunner that blooms in early July, *Lilium* 'Mahogany Bells', sports 4-foot-tall brown stems and bountiful, rich mahogany-red blooms.

Near the front steps to the house, a martagon with a mouthful of a name, Lily 'Mrs. R.O. Backhouse', features downward-facing, light peach petals. Their creamy undersides remind me of the orange-and-vanilla Creamsicles® I ate as a youngster.

Trillium flowers in white (*Trillium grandiflorum*), yellow (*T. luteum*) and red (*T. recurvatum*) are a sight to behold, scattered around the garden with their elliptical petals.

Rozumalski loves pairing all-gold Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola'), Solomon's seal, boxwood and hydrangea, just for the delicious mix of textures.

In the front yard, a springtime show of the light orange ballerina tulip glows, replaced in the fall with pink turtlehead and a swath of delicate Japanese toad lilies (*Tricyrtis hirta*).

Rozumalski says he's thought carefully about creating combinations of textures—fine and coarse—and combinations of foliage colors. You can't "just throw a bunch of stuff together ... especially in a shade garden," he says.

Versatile Gardeners

While Rozumalski observes his garden as it grows and matures, he knows a changing climate means he will have to adapt, too. Ten years from now, he says, gardeners may have to understand about more diseases, new pests and how to conserve water and other resources.

"We're up against huge changes and we're going to have to become more versatile gardeners," he said. Understanding the conditions and taking steps now to become a little more sustainable in everything we do, he says, will make us better gardeners. 🌿

Gail Brown Hudson has a master's degree in horticulture from the University of Minnesota. She is an award-winning garden writer.

