



The Established Garden Health Check

**A structured self-assessment used
by professional gardeners**

Geoff Ashton

Professional Gardener with 16+ years maintaining established gardens

Four Seasons Garden Services

Introduction

When I first look at an established garden, I instinctively assess a number of structural factors that determine how well it will perform over time.

These are not always obvious problems. Most gardens do not suddenly fail. Instead, small inefficiencies slowly accumulate – plants become crowded, shrubs are pruned at the wrong time, borders lose their balance, and lawns gradually weaken.

The **Established Garden Health Check** is a simplified version of the same mental checklist I use when assessing a client's garden.

It allows you to step back and review the overall condition of your own garden in a structured way.

This assessment focuses on ten key areas that influence how well a garden functions over the long term.

They include areas such as:

- plant spacing
- shrub management
- structural planting
- border balance
- seasonal interest
- lawn health
- soil care

By scoring each area, you will gain a clearer picture of how efficiently your garden is functioning and whether small issues may be developing.

How the Assessment Works

For each of the ten sections that follow, read the description and select the score that most closely reflects the current condition of your garden.

Use the following scale:

Score	Meaning
5	Excellent – this area is functioning well
4	Good – generally working well with minor issues
3	Acceptable – some inefficiencies developing
2	Weak – noticeable problems
1	Poor – this area is causing problems
0	Not present or not functioning

Record your score for each section.

At the end of the assessment you will add your scores together to produce an overall Garden Health Score.

Maximum score: 50

The interpretation guide later in this workbook explains what your score usually indicates about how your garden is performing.

The following sections mirror the main structural factors I typically review when assessing an established garden.

Preparing for Your Garden Health Check

Before completing the assessment, it helps to walk slowly around your garden and observe it as a whole.

Many gardeners assess individual plants while working in the garden, but rarely step back and review how the garden is functioning overall.

Before scoring each section, take a few minutes to:

- Walk through the entire garden from front to back
- Look at borders from a distance as well as close up
- Notice areas that feel crowded, sparse, or out of balance
- Observe where plants appear to be thriving or struggling

Try to complete the assessment based on the garden as it normally performs, rather than how it looks immediately after recent work.

The aim of the Health Check is not to judge the garden harshly, but to gain a clearer picture of how well its underlying structure is functioning.

1. Plant Spacing and Overcrowding

One of the first things I assess in a garden is how much space plants have to grow.

Many gardens begin with well-spaced planting, but over time plants mature and gradually compete with each other for light, nutrients and water. When this happens, the strongest plants dominate while others weaken or disappear.

Overcrowding is one of the most common reasons borders begin to lose their balance.

Signs that spacing is working well include:

- Individual plants are clearly visible
- Shrubs have room to develop their natural shape
- Perennials are not constantly pushing into neighbouring plants
- Air can move freely through the border

Signs that overcrowding may be developing include:

- Plants merging into one dense mass
- Shrubs growing into each other
- Weaker plants disappearing
- Increased disease due to lack of airflow
- Constant need for heavy cutting back

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Plants are well spaced and clearly defined
4	Slight crowding beginning but still balanced
3	Noticeable competition between plants
2	Significant overcrowding affecting plant health
1	Plants heavily competing and losing definition
0	Borders extremely congested or unmanaged

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

2. Structural Plants and Anchors

Healthy gardens usually contain a framework of **structural plants** that give the border shape and stability throughout the year.

These are often shrubs, evergreen plants, or strong clump-forming perennials that act as visual anchors within the border. They provide continuity even when seasonal plants die back or are not in flower.

When a garden lacks structure, borders can look attractive for short periods but appear empty or chaotic for much of the year.

When structure is present, the garden feels balanced and intentional, even outside the main flowering season.

Signs that a garden has good structure include:

- Shrubs or evergreen plants that anchor the border
- Plants that provide form even when not in flower
- A mixture of heights creating a natural framework
- Borders still look organised during winter

Signs that structure may be lacking include:

- Borders dominated by short-lived perennials

- Large gaps appearing in winter
- Plants forming a flat layer with little height variation
- Borders looking untidy outside peak flowering periods

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Strong structure with clear anchor plants
4	Good structure with minor gaps
3	Some structure but inconsistent
2	Weak structure with few anchor plants
1	Very little structural planting
0	No visible structure in the border

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

3. Seasonal Interest and Continuity

A well-performing garden provides interest across much of the year, not just during a short flowering period.

This does not mean something must always be in full flower. Instead, a garden should offer a mixture of features that maintain visual interest through changing seasons. These might include evergreen structure, foliage colour, seed heads, grasses, bark, or plants that flower at different times.

Many gardens look attractive for a few weeks in late spring or early summer, but appear empty or dull during the rest of the year. When this happens, the garden may feel disappointing despite containing many healthy plants.

Signs that seasonal interest is working well include:

- Different plants flowering at different times
- Evergreen plants providing winter structure
- Seed heads, grasses, variegated leaves or bark adding autumn and winter interest
- Borders remaining visually balanced outside peak flowering periods

Signs that seasonal continuity may be lacking include:

- Most plants flowering at the same time
- Borders appearing empty for long periods

- Little winter interest once herbaceous plants die back
- Large areas of the garden looking inactive for several months

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Interest present throughout most of the year
4	Good seasonal spread with minor quiet periods
3	Some seasonal balance but noticeable gaps
2	Interest limited to a short period
1	Very little seasonal continuity
0	Garden only attractive for a brief time

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

4. Shrub Management and Pruning Timing

Shrubs often form the backbone of an established garden, providing structure, height and seasonal interest.

However, many shrubs require pruning at specific times of year to maintain healthy growth and reliable flowering. When pruning happens at the wrong time, the plant may remain healthy but quietly lose its ability to flower well the following season.

Because this change happens gradually, it often goes unnoticed for several years.

When shrubs are managed correctly they continue to produce fresh growth, maintain a balanced shape and flower reliably.

Signs that shrub management is working well include:

- Shrubs maintaining a natural shape
- Healthy new growth appearing each season
- Reliable flowering from year to year
- Plants not becoming overly woody or congested

Signs that shrub management may be causing problems include:

- Shrubs becoming dense and woody
- Plants producing little new growth

- Flowering gradually declining
- Shrubs being cut back heavily at random times of year

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Shrubs are well maintained and pruned correctly
4	Minor pruning inconsistencies but generally healthy
3	Some shrubs showing signs of poor management
2	Several shrubs overgrown or poorly pruned
1	Shrubs heavily overgrown or repeatedly cut incorrectly
0	Shrubs unmanaged or severely neglected

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

5. Border Balance (Shrubs and Perennials)

Most successful borders contain a balanced mixture of shrubs and herbaceous plants.

Shrubs provide structure, height and long-term stability. Perennials add seasonal colour and variety. When these two elements are balanced, the border feels full, layered and cohesive throughout the year.

Over time, however, borders often drift toward one extreme or the other. Some gardens become dominated by shrubs that gradually crowd out smaller plants. Others become filled with perennials but lack the framework needed to hold the planting together.

When balance is lost, borders may feel either heavy and congested or light but lacking definition.

Signs that border balance is working well include:

- A mixture of shrubs and perennials within the border
- Plants arranged in layers of height and depth
- Shrubs providing background structure
- Perennials filling gaps with seasonal colour

Signs that balance may be drifting include:

- Borders dominated by dense shrubs

- Shrubs crowding out smaller plants
- Large areas filled with perennials but lacking structure
- Borders appearing flat or lacking depth

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Strong balance between shrubs and perennials
4	Good balance with minor dominance developing
3	Some imbalance beginning to appear
2	One plant type clearly dominating the border
1	Border heavily dominated by shrubs or perennials
0	Border structure severely unbalanced

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

6. Lawn Health and Maintenance

In many gardens the lawn forms the largest single feature, so its condition has a strong influence on the overall appearance of the garden.

A healthy lawn is usually the result of **regular, balanced care** rather than occasional reactive treatments. Lawns that receive periodic feeding, moss control and good mowing practices tend to remain dense, resilient and visually consistent.

When maintenance becomes irregular or reactive, lawns often begin to thin gradually. Moss may increase, weeds begin to spread, and the grass loses its density and colour.

Because this change happens slowly, it is often accepted as normal rather than recognised as a correctable issue.

Signs that lawn care is working well include:

- Grass forming a dense, even surface
- Healthy colour through most of the growing season
- Minimal moss or broadleaf weeds
- Lawn recovering quickly after mowing

Signs that lawn health may be declining include:

- Moss becoming increasingly visible

- Weeds spreading across the lawn
- Thin or patchy areas appearing
- Lawn losing colour or vigour during the growing season

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Lawn dense, healthy and well maintained
4	Generally healthy with minor issues
3	Noticeable thinning or weeds developing
2	Significant moss, weeds or patchiness
1	Lawn weak and struggling to recover
0	Lawn severely degraded or largely moss/weeds

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

7. Soil Care and Mulching

Healthy soil is the foundation of a successful garden. While plant selection and pruning often receive most of the attention, long-term garden performance depends heavily on how well the soil is cared for.

Over time, soil gradually loses structure and organic matter unless it is regularly replenished. Mulching with organic materials such as compost, well-rotted manure, or leaf mould helps maintain soil health by improving moisture retention, encouraging beneficial organisms and slowly releasing nutrients.

Gardens where soil care is neglected often begin to show subtle signs of decline. Plants may struggle during dry periods, growth may slow, and borders may require increasing amounts of watering and feeding.

Signs that soil care is working well include:

- Borders receiving regular organic mulches
- Soil remaining moist and friable beneath the surface
- Plants showing steady, healthy growth
- Earthworms and soil life present in the border

Signs that soil care may be lacking include:

- Soil becoming hard or compacted
- Plants struggling during dry weather
- Increased reliance on frequent watering or feeding

- Little evidence of organic matter being added to the soil

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Soil regularly improved with organic matter
4	Soil generally healthy with occasional mulching
3	Some soil care but inconsistent
2	Soil rarely improved or mulched
1	Soil compacted or depleted
0	Soil condition severely limiting plant growth

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

8. Weed Pressure

Weeds are a normal part of any garden, but the **level of weed pressure** often reveals whether a garden is being managed proactively or reactively.

In well-maintained gardens, weeds are usually removed early and borders are kept well mulched, which reduces the number of new weeds germinating. Over time this keeps weed levels manageable and prevents them from dominating the planting.

Where maintenance becomes irregular, weeds often begin to establish more strongly. Once this happens they compete with ornamental plants for light, water and nutrients, and the garden gradually becomes harder to maintain.

Because this shift happens slowly, many gardeners adapt to the increasing workload without realising the underlying cause.

Signs that weed pressure is under control include:

- Weeds appearing occasionally but removed easily
- Borders largely free of established weeds
- Mulch helping suppress new weed growth
- Plants able to grow without strong competition

Signs that weed pressure may be increasing include:

- Weeds appearing quickly after removal
- Established weeds spreading through borders
- Seedling weeds germinating in large numbers

- Weeding becoming increasingly time-consuming

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Weed levels low and easily controlled
4	Occasional weeds but manageable
3	Noticeable weeds developing
2	Significant weed presence
1	Weeds dominating parts of the garden
0	Borders largely overrun with weeds

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

9. Plant Suitability for Conditions

Plants perform best when they are well suited to the conditions in which they are growing. Factors such as sunlight, soil type, moisture levels and exposure all influence how well a plant will establish and thrive.

When plants are placed in conditions that suit them, they usually grow strongly, maintain good foliage, and require relatively little intervention to remain healthy.

However, many gardens gradually accumulate plants that are not ideally suited to their location. These plants may survive for several years but often grow poorly, become prone to disease, or require frequent attention to keep them looking presentable.

Because the decline is gradual, it is easy to assume that the plant itself is weak rather than recognising that it is simply in the wrong place.

Signs that plants are well suited to their conditions include:

- Plants showing steady, healthy growth
- Foliage appearing full and well coloured
- Plants flowering or performing reliably each year
- Little need for constant intervention to keep plants healthy

Signs that plants may be struggling in their location include:

- Plants failing to thrive despite care

- Weak or sparse foliage
- Frequent pest or disease problems
- Plants repeatedly needing replacement

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Plants well matched to their conditions
4	Mostly suitable plants with minor issues
3	Several plants struggling in their location
2	Many plants poorly suited to conditions
1	Plants regularly failing or needing replacement
0	Planting largely unsuitable for the site

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

10. Maintenance Rhythm

One of the most important factors influencing long-term garden performance is the **rhythm of maintenance** throughout the year.

Successful gardens are rarely maintained through occasional large interventions. Instead, they benefit from a steady pattern of smaller tasks carried out at the appropriate times of year.

These tasks might include pruning shrubs after flowering, dividing overcrowded perennials, applying mulch to borders, feeding lawns during the growing season, and removing weeds before they establish.

When this rhythm is maintained, gardens tend to remain balanced and manageable. Plants grow within their intended space, flowering remains reliable, and problems are corrected before they become difficult to address.

When maintenance becomes irregular, however, the garden often drifts slowly out of balance. Tasks accumulate, plants become congested, and larger corrective work becomes necessary.

Signs that maintenance rhythm is working well include:

- Regular seasonal tasks carried out at appropriate times
- Pruning and dividing happening before plants become overcrowded
- Borders and lawns maintained steadily throughout the year
- The garden remaining manageable without large corrective interventions

Signs that maintenance rhythm may be breaking down include:

- Tasks being postponed for long periods
- Plants becoming overgrown before action is taken
- Large corrective pruning or clearing becoming necessary
- The garden gradually becoming harder to manage

Score Your Garden for This Section

Score	Description
5	Maintenance rhythm well established throughout the year
4	Generally consistent with occasional delays
3	Some seasonal tasks missed or delayed
2	Maintenance irregular and reactive
1	Many tasks postponed or neglected
0	Little or no structured maintenance occurring

Record your score: _____

Add your observations (e.g. overcrowded shrubs, declining flowering, areas needing attention)

Calculate Your Garden Health Score

You have now assessed ten key areas that influence how well an established garden performs over time.

Add together the scores you recorded for each section to calculate your overall **Garden Health Score**.

Most established gardens score somewhere between **21 and 40** on the first assessment.

Section	Score
1. Plant spacing and overcrowding	—
2. Structural plants and anchors	—
3. Seasonal interest and continuity	—
4. Shrub management and pruning	—
5. Border balance	—
6. Lawn health	—
7. Soil care and mulching	—
8. Weed pressure	—
9. Plant suitability	—
10. Maintenance rhythm	—

Total Score (out of 50): _____

What Your Score Usually Means

41-50

Garden Structurally Strong

Your garden is functioning well in most areas. Plants are likely well suited to their location, maintenance is happening at appropriate times, and the overall structure of the garden is stable.

Minor improvements may still be possible, but the overall framework of the garden appears sound.

31-40

Minor Inefficiencies Developing

Most gardens fall within this range.

The garden is generally healthy but small structural issues may be developing. These often include mild overcrowding, uneven seasonal interest, or shrubs that are beginning to lose shape.

Addressing these issues early usually prevents more significant problems developing later.

21-30

Garden Beginning to Drift

At this stage the garden may still look attractive overall, but small structural issues are beginning to accumulate beneath the surface.

Common patterns at this level include:

- overcrowded borders
- declining shrub performance
- seasonal gaps in interest
- lawns gradually weakening

Without occasional corrective work, these problems often become more noticeable over time.

11-20

Significant Structural Issues

Gardens in this range usually benefit from more deliberate intervention.

Plants may be competing heavily, shrubs may have become woody or poorly shaped, and parts of the garden may feel difficult to maintain.

A structured plan often helps restore balance and prevent the workload continuing to increase.

0-10

Garden Requires Major Correction

At this level the garden is likely struggling in several areas at once.

Borders may be congested, lawns weak or moss-dominated, and maintenance tasks may feel overwhelming.

Gradual structural improvement is usually needed to restore the garden to a manageable condition.

A Quick Reflection

Now that you have completed the Health Check, take a moment to consider three simple questions:

- Which area of the garden received the lowest score?
- Which issue feels most difficult to correct on your own?
- Which improvement would make the biggest difference to how your garden feels?

Many gardeners find that identifying these answers is the point where the garden begins to move forward.

What to Do With Your Results

By completing this assessment you have created something that many gardens never receive – a **structured audit of how your garden is functioning**.

Even if you decide to take no further action at this stage, the scorecard you have completed is a useful reference. It highlights the areas of the garden that may need attention and gives you a clear starting point for improving things gradually over time.

Many gardeners find that simply becoming aware of these structural factors helps them make better decisions when working in the garden.

You can use your notes and scores as a guide when planning future improvements, whether that involves adjusting planting, improving soil care, or addressing maintenance tasks that may have been overlooked.

However, while the Health Check helps identify *where* issues may exist, it does not always explain **exactly how those issues should be corrected in your particular garden**.

Every garden has its own combination of:

- soil conditions
- light levels
- existing plants

- local climate
- maintenance preferences

Because of this, the most effective improvements are usually based on **specific guidance tailored to the garden itself.**

The Next Step: A Garden Guidance Review

If you would like a clearer plan for improving your garden, the next step is the **Garden Guidance Review**.

During the review I assess your garden using the same structural principles covered in this workbook, but applied directly to your individual garden.

The review provides:

- a professional assessment of your existing planting
- identification of structural issues affecting performance
 - guidance on what to prioritise first
- practical seasonal actions to improve the garden gradually

Many gardeners find this helpful because it replaces uncertainty with a **clear plan for moving the garden forward**.

If you would like to learn more about how the Garden Guidance Review works, you can find the details here:

[Learn more about the Garden Guidance Service](#)

A Final Thought

Most gardens do not decline suddenly.

They simply drift slightly out of balance over time.

If you decide to proceed with a Garden Guidance Review, the notes you have made during this Health Check become a useful starting point for the discussion.

The cost of this Health Check will also be credited toward the review.