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Seville Consulting
Natural Areas



Making the right decisions while creating or updating your landscape can provide you with a yard that will be a low-maintenance, beautiful environment for many years to come.



Natural Areas

Consider the Planet When Planning a Landscape

By Carl Seville

Every house has a yard, some or all of which is landscaped, either by a professional or the homeowner. While styles differ, we all envision this area as an oasis that helps us reconnect with nature. Unfortunately, much landscaping is done in a way that leads to excessive water use through irrigation, causes pollution from water and fertilizer runoff, exacerbates environmental overheating, and requires disposal of yard waste. All of these lead to degradation of our environment. When creating a landscape plan, we have the option of using alternative methods and materials that will act positively on the environment and provide us with sustainable, enjoyable outdoor environments.

Plant selection and layout are directly related to how much water is required to irrigate. Turf grasses and non-native plants require more frequent irrigation than plants that are indigenous to our region. Native species are adapted to the climate and can survive - and sometimes even thrive - through both drought and downpour. Non-native and invasive plants can threaten natural plants and require extensive measures to keep them under control - think about kudzu, originally brought here from Japan because it was considered an excellent ground cover, only to take over much of the countryside. Consider leaving sections of your yard natural with wildflowers and berries that will attract birds while requiring little or no maintenance.

Plan your garden with separate watering zones, segregating the plants in each zone by their individual irrigation demand, from high to low. This allows you to avoid both under- and over-watering by irrigating only when the plants need it, while eliminating artificial irrigation in the low-water zones that can be maintained by natural rainfall. Lawns are often irrigated on a set schedule, with no regard for how wet or dry they are. Grass that is allowed to dry out before being watered actually develops deeper and stronger roots, so skip the schedule and only turn on the sprinklers when the lawn is dry. Water in the early morning, use soaker and drip methods rather than broadcast sprinklers to save water, and water infrequently for longer periods to make the best use of our water resources.

Design your yard to avoid runoff during storms. Runoff deprives your plants of much-needed free water and carries silt, fertilizers and chemicals to our rivers, causing long-term damage. Create rain gardens in low-lying areas to retain water on your site. Install less paving and consider using pervious paving materials, which allow water to soak into the ground instead of running off into the street. Another way to reduce runoff is to avoid compacting soil, a common occurrence with the equipment used for grading and construction. Trees have critical root zones that often extend well beyond the drip line of the canopy. Driving on these areas can damage the roots and reduce the permeability of the soil, creating additional runoff.

Yard maintenance typically creates large volumes of grass clippings, leaves and other waste that is time consuming and costly to dispose of. Consider using your leaves as mulch around your trees and shrubs and leaving the grass clippings on your lawn. When mowing the lawn, set your mower higher and keep your blades sharp to avoid tearing the grass. During installation, waste such as pallets and containers can be recycled to cut down on the amount of materials sent to landfills. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that homeowners use up to 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre on their lawns than farmers use on crops. Careful selection of native plants and limited use of organic soil additives can help reduce the use of pesticides and fertilizers that contaminate the environment.

Landscaping almost always includes paving, decks, walls and

other manmade features. Work to keep the area of improvements to a minimum, and select the most sustainable materials for your project. Look for wood products that have been certified as sustainably harvested. Select durable materials such as brick, stone and concrete, and use lighter colors to avoid overheating. Provide shading on paved surfaces wherever possible to keep them cooler on hot days. Finally, look for materials that are recycled, such as stone and brick, or produced locally to reduce their transportation costs and carbon footprint.

Making the right decisions while creating or updating your landscape can provide you with a yard consisting of a combination of native plants, limited turf and pervious paving, mulched with clippings and natural yard waste, that will be a low-maintenance, beautiful environment for many years to come. 🌱

Visit www.TodaysCustomHome.com for links to in-depth information on each of the environmentally sensitive landscaping topics mentioned here. Carl Seville is a green builder, consultant, educator and writer on sustainability. He founded, and for 25 years served as Vice President of, SawHorse, Inc., an Atlanta design/build firm. Through Seville Consulting, his firm helps homeowners and builders create healthy, efficient and durable buildings by incorporating sustainable practices and certifying homes under the LEED for Homes, EarthCraft, NAHB, and ENERGY STAR programs. Call him at (404) 597-7782.

