

Neighborhood-Friendly Landscapes

As the issues of water quality and habitat loss become more critical, many people are adopting a natural approach to home landscaping. Natural landscapes, also called habitat gardens, consist mainly of native plants. They can take many forms, ranging from wild and unkempt to a more traditional, manicured design.

Occasionally, conflicts over these landscapes have arisen in neighborhoods, homeowner associations, and cities. But such conflicts need not be inevitable. You may be able to avoid “weed wars” by setting an example through good communication and proper maintenance practices.

Below are some strategies for fostering communication and education to help avoid confrontation before, during, and after you develop your natural landscape.

Learn the rules. Before converting your yard into a habitat garden, become familiar with the local ordinances, policies, and deed restrictions governing residential areas. Understand the



process of applying for a variance or permit as well as the appeals process, if needed.

This information is readily available from city parks departments, homeowner association offices, or property management companies.

Learn the benefits of natural landscapes. Know what you want to accomplish in changing your landscape. You will be better able to answer the “why” questions as well as capitalize on opportunities to win support and possible converts.

Educate others. Find ways to inform others by word and deed. Welcome questions from neighbors, create a landscape that others will want to use as an example, and participate at homeowner association or community association meetings.

Change gradually. You could begin by placing a few native plants along the borders of a bed. A next step might be to enlarge the landscape beds a bit each year, to gradually accustom your neighbors to the new approach.

Communicate with neighbors. Let them know about your plans, and keep the conversations positive. For instance, you could give updates to the neighbors as the landscape progresses. Welcoming neighborhood children to learn about your landscape could generate excitement that they could transfer to the adults.

Use identification tags on plants if possible. Those who are unfamiliar with native plants may think they look odd or unruly. Plant tags can introduce them to new types of plants, give prominence to natives in the landscape, and offer an instant source of education.

Create borders or setbacks. Neat edges create the appearance of order, even if it's ordered chaos. Setback planting—placing trees and flowers behind the sidewalk and out of the right of way—will help keep the plants from hanging over curbs or sidewalks.

Think “plant communities.” Create planting zones by grouping species found in naturally occurring areas such as wetlands, prairies, or shaded forests. The plants in these zones will have similar light and moisture requirements.

For visual impact, plant in masses. Native plants are sometimes less showy than traditional landscape plants. Planting them in large groups offers eye-catching interest.



Vary plant selection size, color, and texture. Landscapes are more interesting and visually appealing when plants with varying characteristics are planted together to form a rich tapestry.

Avoid straight lines and hard edges. Curved planting beds enhance the natural look of the landscapes and incorporate good basic landscape design.

Add structural interest. Birdbaths, garden structures, and even sculptures can add a personal signature to your landscape.

Maintain your landscape properly. Allowing the natural landscape to succumb to a “vacant lot” look will not create a climate of understanding or acceptance.

Tolerate differences. Recognize and acknowledge your neighbors' choices in plant types and landscape approaches.

Use legal means only as a last resort. Although cities and homeowner associations are becoming more sensitive to environmental issues, many still rely on outdated concepts and laws. Antagonistic approaches seldom win support or approval, but promoting a spirit of cooperation and goodwill can help.

Photos by Chris LaChance

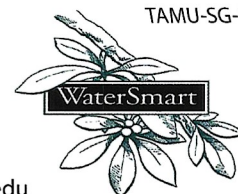
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