

Sustainable landscaping

Tough economic times give legitimate cause to rethink our actions. What if you could minimize your monthly expenses for a good portion of the year, gain precious time for things you truly enjoy and do something to benefit the environment?



Lawn care is an expensive undertaking. A 1-acre lawn requires an annual investment of \$400-700, and the average homeowner spends 40 hours a year mowing. Instead, consider sustainable, also called native or natural, landscaping. A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report cites a number of factors that support rethinking the nature of our lawns:

- Each year, lawnmowers use 580 million gallons of gas and emit 5 percent of the ozone-forming VOCs, which are linked to global warming and human health issues.

- Homeowners apply 67 million pounds of pesticides on their lawns each year, and use 10 times more pesticides than the agricultural community. Studies report that half of pesticide users do not read or follow pesticide labels, and that up to 74 percent are not safely storing pesticide containers. In the U.S., an estimated 110,000 people are sickened, and 60 to 70 million birds killed, by pesticides annually.

- More than 75 percent of flowering plants need an animal pollinator, such as bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and bats. Pollinator numbers throughout the world have plummeted over the last 60 years, declines attributed to habitat loss/fragmentation, pesticides, parasites, diseases and a lack of floral resources.

Native plants are our heritage, and using these species in our landscaping provides multiple environmental and economic benefits, which reap tremendous benefits for many years.

Clean water is a commodity that can't be wasted. Native plants are hardy and drought resistant, decreasing your monthly water bill. Take it one step further and help preserve our soils and water by installing a rain barrel, rain garden or water garden.

Requiring no fertilizer or mowing, use of native species decreases chemical runoff into our rivers and lakes, the amount of time spent mowing, noise pollution and the consumption of gasoline.

Incorporating a variety of native species in your plantings supports a diverse complement of wildlife, and provides a range of textures and colors throughout the blooming period. In addition, the remnants of grasses, seed pods and colorful barks provide visual interest well into winter.

Sustainable landscaping results in cash in your pocket. At one residential development in Grayslake, developers planted both turf and native prairie areas. Establishing the prairie cost 56 percent less than the turf lawns, and over the next 5 years, an average of \$3,400 less was spent per acre maintaining the naturalized areas.

What can you do to start making a transition to a sustainable lawn?

Learn what type of weed laws your local government has enacted. Fortunately, many municipalities are supportive of natural landscaping as long as the planting has a planned look and does not interfere with the field of vision for passing traffic.

Opt for long-lived perennial plants this spring instead of annuals. Over time you'll see a decrease in your annual expenditure for plant material and experience a landscape that grows more lush and colorful each year.

Regardless if your lawn is sunny or shady, there are appropriate native plants. Inquire at your local nursery

what native species are best for your situation, and if the plants were grown locally, making them more suitable for the regional climate than plants shipped in from elsewhere.

Look for sunflowers, blazing star, sideoats grama and prairie dropseed to attract songbirds. Plant columbine, jewelweed, cardinal flower and native phlox or honeysuckle and you'll have hours of enjoyment watching hummingbirds. If your interest is butterflies, plant black-eyed Susan, New Jersey tea, coreopsis, joe-pye weed, ironweed, vervain, purple coneflower, asters, goldenrods and milkweeds.

Yes, asters, goldenrods and milkweeds. These plants may be used with confidence, knowing that these insect-pollinated plants are not the cause of allergies, but that non-natives, such as Bermuda grass, Kentucky bluegrass and orchard grass, take that honor.

Naturalizing your landscape is a great project for the entire family. Working with you, children gain a greater understanding of the relationships between plants and animals and develop a stronger sense of responsibility for Mother Earth. As the landscape matures, so do the young gardeners and their understanding of the natural world.

Keep a log of your wild visitors. Note hummingbirds hovering over fiery red columbine, resident frogs and salamanders in your water garden and monarch caterpillars munching on the leaves of native milkweeds.

Enjoy more family time outdoors this year, and be thankful for the mosquito control team, the bats, purple martins and swallows, you are hosting.

Become a sustainable landscaper and return to our native roots.

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read 'Marc Miller'.

Marc Miller, Director