



Evolving the Urban Landscape *By Pierre R Marizco*

You may think landscape renovation is too expensive and daunting. But while it's true that landscaping can be costly if not done efficiently, it's also possible to break up the scope of any project to meet your budget. And you can keep costs down by thinking more about conservation on every level. The plan should be to create a landscape that respects the natural attributes of our region and contributes to the health, diversity and sustainability of our Russian River and San Francisco Bay ecosystems. A well designed and maintained landscape will consume fewer resources and cost less to maintain.

Turf of the past

A rich, green lawn is beautiful—it's refreshing, cool and brings peace to a landscape—but the drawbacks of maintaining a large lawn are too significant to ignore. Our urban landscapes have, in the past, been created with maximum output and minimal input. Large, lush, manicured lawn areas and neatly sculpted, non-native plants require abundant irrigation and significant use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers to maintain healthy growing conditions. These landscapes also require excess amounts of fuel and oil to run maintenance machinery and send large amounts of green waste to our landfills.

It's estimated that a 500-square-foot lawn area requires 10,000 gallons of water during non-rainy months. If the last time you walked on your lawn was when you mowed it, consider removing it or, at a minimum, reducing its total square footage. If you want a lawn area at your business, limit its square footage to 25 percent of the total irrigated area. For residential landscapes, reduce the amount to a small area in the backyard where it will be used for recreation.

The right plant in the right place

Plant selection is key to creating a landscape that will lessen the use of chemicals and reduce irrigation needs and greenhouse gas emissions. Selecting the right plant can also create a beautiful garden that works in harmony with nature.

Choose plants to match the microclimate, soil conditions and sun exposure of your site. You'll need less maintenance and experience less plant health issues if you select ones that will thrive in their new location. Design your landscape with plant maturity in mind, and avoid over-planting for instant effect. Choosing plants that can grow to their natural size in the space chosen will lessen the amount of pruning and create less green waste. One of the reasons hedges are sheared is because the shrubs outgrow their allotted area. But shearing increases labor, fuel and waste, and removes all new growth and blossoms.

I recommend drought-tolerant, native and Mediterranean plants. California natives such as Manzanita and Ceanothus are adapted to our soils, wildlife and climate. Yeddo Hawthorne, Euphorbia and Wild Lilac look beautiful and, once established, don't require summer watering. Mediterranean plants like ornamental grasses, Bush Germander, Lavandin Hedge Lavender or Dwarf

Fruitless Olive also thrive with little irrigation. For a listing of low water use plant materials, download the Water Use Classifications of Landscape Species (WUCOLS) list at www.water.ca.gov/water-useefficiency/docs/wucols00.pdf.

Using trees strategically throughout your property provides natural air conditioning and can lower cooling costs by as much as 40 percent. Trees also absorb greenhouse gases, reduce storm-water runoff and add to property values. Whenever possible, choose plants that will provide habitat food (like nectar) for beneficial wildlife such as butterflies and bees. Last but not least, introduce edibles to your landscape. Have you ever seen how beautiful an artichoke flower is?

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Mulch much more

Avoid removing leaves as they drop from trees, because they become organic matter; nutrients are recycled, habitat is created and waste is reduced. Use less

herbicides by adding a layer of organic mulch two to four inches thick, which helps to keep the soil cooler, reduces water needs and suppresses weeds and other invasive species of plants.

Reduce or eliminate synthetic pesticides and control pests by using less toxic alternatives. Many pesticides are toxic to microbes and severely alter the diversity of soil life. Accepting a higher threshold of pests will aid in protecting our watersheds and air quality. Likewise, synthetic fertilizers are fast-acting and frequently wash through soil before plants have time to absorb them. Build a healthy soil for long-term benefits by using compost teas and organic fertilizers. Finally, compost your green waste onsite by building and managing compost bins, and convert your mulch to natural soil amendments.

A change for the better

Many of us are managing landscapes that were originally installed when a building or house was erected. And we've been maintaining them with pollutants that, as rain and irrigation water flowed from the landscape into the gutters, were carried into our lakes, streams, rivers and watersheds.

The good news is, the word "sustainable," and the associated concepts of conservation and recycling, hold a growing significance today. Our priorities have shifted, and it's up to each of us to create and nurture more environmentally friendly landscapes. Let's kick our old habits and change our perception of the phrase "beautiful landscape" to mean "inherently beautiful and naturally sustainable ecosystem."

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