

# 10 design tips

## for low-maintenance landscapes

By LORI LYMAN



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**T**oday's successful landscape architects strive to create progressive, functional, beautiful landscapes. In recent years many of these leading edge projects can be described as being more "natural." The goal is to provide clients with landscapes that, following Mother Nature's example, require less time and expense to maintain than more traditional designs. This doesn't mean every landscape has to be a native restoration project though.

The following 10 tips will outline alternative practices for designing low-maintenance landscapes.

### 1) Right plant/right place

The right plant/right place rule can't be reinforced enough. Too often we are tempted to use a plant in the wrong place simply because it would look good. Then, in two or three years, stress has weakened the plant to a point where it requires

more intensive maintenance.

Aldo Leopold emphasized the importance of this idea in his 1966 work, "The Land Ethic." He wrote: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." In his statement, Leopold was referring to a larger scale of environmental impacts, but we can still apply his thought to individual projects through proper selection of plant materials.

For example, buckthorn was introduced to the United States from Europe to be used primarily as an ornamental tree. Unfortunately, it entered our woodlands and now competes with indigenous species. Lythrum is another example that it re-seeds in such tremendous quantities that it stifles native species which would otherwise provide food and refuge for wildlife. Often exotic plants that aren't indigenous to a region can cause more harm than good.

That's why it's best to stay with materials whose proven performance suits the location you're placing it in. Not only are there environmental issues concerning right plant in the right place, but future maintenance, removal and replacement costs.

### 2) Large sweeping beds

Gentle sweeping beds offer ease of mowing which is usually a good percentage of a maintenance contract. Equally

The dwarf fountain grass in the lower left corner blends well with the surrounding hardscape.



important, they look good. Again, large drifts or sweeps are natural. Singular plantings are not.

### 3) Design with natural landforms

The common and economical mass grading of sites needs to be closely monitored. Mass grading often destroys landforms and existing vegetation that could be preserved. The less interference in native areas like woodlands, the less maintenance will be required in keeping them healthy for years to come.

Familiarize yourself with a site's microclimates as well. Be aware of areas subject to wind, areas that warm more quickly from the sun, and areas prone to snow stockpiles.

### 4) Sensible use of annual flowers

In a recent symposium at the Chicago Botanic Gardens a quote from a 130-year-old publication, "British Grasses" was discussed. The quote: "of late years public taste has been turned to the advantageous effect of grasses in landscape gardening. Ferns had the credit of first winning attention from color to form, and grasses next stepped in to confirm the preference for grace and elegance over gaudy colouring."

This shows two thoughts—one is that garden styles repeat themselves. Also, we seem to be rediscovering a trend toward native restoration, including the use of more plants like ornamental grasses, ferns, flowering perennials and groundcovers in places that were previously planted with higher-maintenance, high-color annuals.

### 5) Unity with variety

There are many examples of problems occurring with monocultures including the disastrous effects arising from Dutch elm



McDonald's office campus is known for its "natural" restored woodland design.

disease and, more recently, with Diplodia tip blight on Austrian pines. The key here is to plant "unity with variety."

### 6) Mulch periodically

Mulching improves the aesthetics, minimizes weeds, helps preserve soil moisture and keeps soil temperatures constant in areas that lack other effective vegetative groundcovers.

### 7) Cultivate with care, or not at all

Cultivating beds can destroy the roots of plants as well as have negative affects on some of the beneficial micro-organisms in the soil. Usually cultivating is done for aesthetic purposes. More often than not, it can be avoided by planting the proper groundcover, or by mulching.

### 8) Tip prune, don't shear

It costs more to take the time to shear plants than it does to tip prune, which allows a more natural look and results in healthier plants.

### 9) Appropriate proportions of fine turf

By naturalizing existing finished lawns you may invest some dollars upfront but in the end you ultimately reduce mainte-

nance costs by reducing irrigation, fertilization and mowing. Large corporate properties seem to be in the forefront of this trend. For example, in 1996 the American Society of Landscape Architects, Illinois Chapter, presented awards to 20 projects. Most contained elements of environmental restoration and incorporated low-maintenance design features.

### 10) Simplify fall cleanups

If a landscape is designed to have a more natural look there can be less of a need for intensive fall cleanups during which we take away the natural process of decomposition. By allowing leaves to remain on the site they can decompose and return organic material to the soil. Also, many perennials, including native grasses, are more striking when left uncut, and provide form and substance to a landscape all winter long. □

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