

Landscapes 'go native'

Thoughtful design, proper plant selection and careful installation will give your clients a natural landscape that's pleasing to the eye and easy to maintain

By JOHN C. FECH, Ph.D.

As attractive as wildflowers can be, they are not the only choice (or even the most appropriate choice) for naturalizing a landscape.

As maintenance dollars become scarce, landscape owners and managers are looking at the alternatives. You might convince the owner of the site to increase the maintenance budget. You could prioritize sections of the landscape, reclassifying them as low, medium and high maintenance, instead of treating all parts similarly. Or you could create a partially or completely naturalized landscape.

Going wild?

You may picture a naturalized landscape as a house surrounded by a field of wildflowers or the removal of all improved or ornamental cultivars of shrubs, grasses and trees, allowing the seeds in the soil to take over. This is far from the truth and quite different from the actual realities of a well planned naturalized landscape.

A naturalized landscape begins with sound, sustainable landscape design principles. It blends aesthetics, function and maintenance within existing land forms. It contains native, low-input plants and a framework for low maintenance when finished, including reduced chemical and water usage. It will provide habitat for wildlife and is an attractive alternative where low maintenance and subtle beauty are desired.

Lots of benefits

- ▶ Native plantings can be beautiful, offering color and texture not seen in exotic species.
- ▶ They contribute to diversity in the landscape, which is crucial in this age of "cookie-cutter landscape design."
- ▶ Native plants offer food and shelter to wildlife.



► Native plants can highlight local and regional "best kept secrets."

► They normally require low inputs of pesticides, fertilizers and water.

► Native plants, in a natural landscape, generally don't require much maintenance — pruning, transplanting, staking, etc.

Right plant, right place

Naturalizing a landscape usually results from of a change in the plan for the site. In some cases, the owners or stakeholders of a landscape space noticed an attractive naturalized landscape on a recent trip or even in another part of their neighborhood.

A common mistake is to skip the design process and implement a quick and easy solution. For example, spraying the existing plants with Roundup and reseeding the entire landscape to native grasses would be a huge mistake. Besides the drastic impact

"right place" applies. Consider factors such as shade, sun, wind, views, soil pH and slope. Would you plant mountain wildflowers in Dallas? Or install a xeric landscape in Seattle? Of course not. Know the hardiness, color and textural features of each plant, as well as invasive qualities.

Ideally, the overall design concept of a naturalized landscape will dictate a program. A typical program statement for a naturalized design may include minimized turf areas, creation of ornamental beds containing native plants and screening with native trees, among others. Specific plants are chosen at the *end* of the design process, not at the beginning.

Make the site right

Site preparation is just as important in a redesign as in the initial installation. Eliminate existing undesirable plants. Use herbicides like Roundup, Reward or Finale to remove such plants without preventing installation of desirable plants soon after the application. In some cases, a rope wick-type applicator is the best tool to use, as it limits spray drift to desirable native plants.

The soils must drain well and be fertile. Add compost before planting grass and wildflowers to refresh nutrients and aid plant rooting. Once the site is prepared, the plants can be installed. The key concept is to create a rooting area that allows for lateral expansion of the root system, aiding establishment.

In general, the woodier the plant material, the less effective it is to incorporate compost. Roots of herbaceous perennials seldom grow more than a few feet beyond the planting hole, making it feasible to modify the planting site with compost.

Trees and shrubs, however, are likely to produce a lateral root system extending 20 to 100 feet beyond the planting hole. In a typical residential landscape, the roots of a bur oak will fill the entire back yard. So it is generally not practical to amend soil to the planting area for trees and shrubs.

A decade ago, seeding was the only real option for native plantings. Today, you can find native plants in the form of bedding plants, plugs or even sod. The choice to seed or install potted plants is less expensive, but establishment can take two growing seasons. Plants are more costly but establish quickly in a naturalized landscape.

Pay attention to maintenance

Irrigation and weed control are the most important maintenance practices to establish a naturalized landscape. Many native plants require low levels of fertility and are tolerant of pests. Mulch new plantings to provide moisture retention and weed suppression, particularly when installing plugs or pots of native plants.

Seeded plantings are more difficult, since irrigation to encourage establishment of native species also encourages native weeds to germinate and compete. Herbicides such as Plateau can suppress weed growth and allow desirable species, such as those in the Compositae family (Illinois bundleflower, plains coreopsis) to establish.

Tell the property owners that the irrigation requirements are much greater for installation than in the maintenance phase. A reasonable approach is to install a temporary irrigation system, which is designed to function for a year or two. In most cases, such a system is inexpensive and allows adequate time for establishment.

So why naturalize? Many landscape stakeholders are jumping at the chance to create a lower maintenance space while retaining color, texture and high aesthetic appeal. At the very least, the proper consideration of a naturalized landscape will take the owner through a sound landscape renovation or rethinking process, which may lead to other enhancements or refinements. **LM**

—John Fech is with the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.



Properly used native plants can add variety to a landscape, as well as providing food and shelter to wildlife.

of such an approach, imagine the reactions of the neighboring property owners. It's crucial that you educate the owners about the importance of careful planning for effect and impact.

Education must also take into account the actual site and the environmental factors. In all cases, the phrase, "right plant,