

Sustainable Landscaping for Homeowners

Appealing landscapes play an important role in increasing property values and creating more livable communities. Homeowners spend a great deal of money maintaining landscapes.

Unfortunately, many landscapes are not managed efficiently. This increases maintenance costs and wastes natural resources, and it can pollute the environment. With forethought and planning, “sustainable landscapes” can help reduce maintenance costs while producing healthy landscapes and protecting the environment.

What Are Sustainable Landscapes?

Sustainable landscapes mean more than hot, dry gardens of cactus and gravel. Sustainable landscapes feature healthier plants that rely less on chemical pesticides and fertilizers. These landscapes help conserve water, reduce green waste, and protect water quality in creeks and rivers. Here are some landscape tips that can help homeowners reduce maintenance costs while producing healthy landscapes and conserving natural resources.

Watering

Watering keeps plants green; but over-watering can be costly. It causes plant materials to grow faster and requires more pruning, weeding, and mowing. Over-watering is unhealthy for plants and can make them more susceptible to stress and disease. Runoff from over-watering often carries fertilizers and herbicides into local creeks, rivers, and waterways. Runoff also can damage fences, walls, driveways, sidewalks, and street paving.

Efficient irrigation systems can deliver a precise volume of water to plants, which conserves water and produces healthy landscapes. Use drip or low-output sprinkler heads to deliver the proper amount of water to plant root zones. Using soil probes to monitor soil moisture and developing

irrigation schedules based on historical or actual evapotranspiration rates are excellent ways to efficiently irrigate landscapes.

Fertilizing

Excessive fertilizing stresses plants by encouraging rapid growth, making them more susceptible to disease and pest infestations. This rapid growth increases the need for pruning and mowing and creates more green waste. Soil testing can help determine the nutrient needs of the soil before applying fertilizer. Proper fertilization encourages moderate plant growth, produces healthier landscapes, and can reduce surface and groundwater pollution.

Pruning

Plants, shrubs, and trees should be pruned to compliment their natural form. Shrubs and trees are often forced to conform to unnatural shapes and spaces, and practices such as “shearing” and “topping” promote faster growth and require frequent pruning. Shrubs that naturally grow to 10 feet in height are all too often planted in front of 4-foot high windows, resulting in a never-ending cycle of constant pruning, fast plant growth, and creation of large amounts of green waste.

Compost and Mulch

Applying compost and mulch to the landscape as a routine maintenance practice has many benefits. Compost and mulch help build and protect soils, conserve water, prevent erosion, reduce weeds, increase nutrients in the soil, and reduce runoff. Compost and mulch support healthy plant growth, improve landscape appearance, and reduce water and fertilizer use.

Turf Management

Lush, green turf provides an inviting landscape. However, inefficient turf management can increase maintenance costs and waste resources. Many lawns are treated like a “crop”: they are over-watered and over-fertilized to encourage excessive growth. The harvested “crop” of grass clippings is then bagged and disposed.

Grasscycling, the natural practice of leaving clippings on the lawn when mowing, eliminates the need to bag clippings and dispose of them. The clippings quickly decompose, returning valuable nutrients to the soil and producing a healthier lawn. Grasscycling helps reduce fertilizer and water usage, which means less runoff from lawns which can protect local waterways. Grasscycling with electric mulching mowers is also better for the air.

Design/Spacing

The best strategy is to incorporate sustainability when designing landscapes. Limiting the size of turf areas, using water-efficient, low-maintenance plants, and properly spacing new plantings will reduce maintenance costs and conserve resources. Landscapes in new developments often contain ground cover, shrubs, and trees that are planted close together in an attempt to create a “mature” filled-in look. Unfortunately, when the plants reach maturity, they have grown so close together that they require frequent pruning. This produces more green waste.

By properly spacing plants, shrubs and trees, maintenance costs will be reduced while creating attractive, healthy landscapes.

Think Recycle/Buy Recycled

Recycling materials from the construction, installation, or upkeep of landscape sites will reduce waste. Wood waste coverts to mulch, and plastic pots can be recycled into products for landscape use. Buying recycled-content landscaping products, such as plastic edging or lumber, conserves natural resources and strengthens markets for these recyclable materials.

Resources Available From the CIWMB

The California Integrated Waste Management Board’s “Organics Outlook” website provides more information on many of the practices outlined above. Please visit the website at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Organics/Landscaping/.

The Recycled Content Product (RCP) Directory has a list of thousands of recycled-content products on the market. Visit www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/.

The California Materials Exchange (CalMAX) contains listings of suppliers or users of reusable or recyclable organic and landscape materials. Visit www.ciwmb.ca.gov/CalMAX/.

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