

Ecological Landscaping

Ecological landscaping, also known as eco-landscaping, is a way to conserve water, reduce pollution and enhance wildlife habitat. It involves practices such as reducing lawn area, using plants native to our region, composting, mulching and collecting rainwater.

Eco-landscaping contributes to a healthy environment by helping protect communities from pollution and reduces the effects of habitat fragmentation. Small, environmentally friendly landscaping projects will also attract wildlife and can be the cornerstone of a healthy, thriving local ecosystem, with the following benefits:

- Eliminating the need for chemical pesticides and fertilizers
- Increasing native habitat and biodiversity
- Conserving water and improving water quality
- Reducing air and noise pollution
- Reducing home heating and cooling needs through better site design

More reasons to eco-landscape: (source: Mass. Exec. Office of Environmental Affairs)

The average American lawn consumes 10,000 gallons of water annually.

Typically, 5-10 lbs. of pesticides are applied to each acre of lawn per year.

Every summer, 60 million gallons of gasoline are used to power lawn equipment.

Create Your Own Ecological Landscape

Does the idea of a backyard filled with vibrant color, lively sounds and wildlife excite you? Even a small yard can be landscaped to attract a variety of birds, butterflies, beneficial insects and other small animals.

Five Steps to an Ecologically Friendly Backyard

1. **Plan** – the first step on the path to creating an attractive and productive wildlife habitat is to create a landscape design. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your property and select the best area of your yard for the type of garden you wish to plant. Be aware of the zones in your yard-hot/sunny, cool/shady, moist, dry – and plant your lawn and garden accordingly.
 - a. First, know your soils: healthy soils are essential to healthy landscapes. Before taking on any landscaping project, have a soil sample tested. Understanding your soils will help in selecting the appropriate plants for your yard.
 - b. Where you plant trees in your yard can have a positive effect on home heating and cooling costs. Plants evergreens on the side of prevailing winter winds (usually north or northwest). Deciduous trees planted on the south side will shade homes in the warmer months, but let light and heat through after leaves have dropped in the fall. Trees should also be used to shade paved areas.
2. **Plant** – Select native plants, flowers, shrubs and trees that suit the natural habitats in your region. Trees and shrubs are the backbone of any landscape design. Ground cover plants work well in hard-to-reach areas in your yard. Once established, they require very little maintenance and keep the soil loose. Select drought-tolerant plants.
3. **Water** – Established lawns and gardens only need one inch of water a week, so if an inch of rain has fallen, you don't need to water at all! Rainfall can be measured with a rain gauge or collected in a can and measured with a ruler.
 - a. You can also collect rainwater in a rain barrel and use that to water gardens. Rain barrels connect to gutter downspouts and collect roof runoff that might otherwise run into storm drains. Most storm drains empty into nearby rivers, streams or wetlands, along with any pollutants the water picks up along the way. Collecting runoff in a rain barrel keeps water on site and provides a handy source of water for the garden.

4. **Compost** – Organic yard waste is a major contributor to American landfills. By composting, you can keep yard waste on site and create healthy, enriched soil, which is better at retaining water, at the same time. Compost can be made at home by recycling vegetable scraps or purchased at garden centers. Mix into beds before planting and top-dress occasionally throughout the growing season.
5. **Mulch** – Mulching around plants reduces weeds, evaporation and protects plants in winter. Keep garden beds covered with 2-4 inches of organic mulch to retain moisture and enrich soils.

Lawn

Lawns can be lovely, but don't provide much habitat for wildlife and contribute to a host of environmental problems associated with excess watering, fertilizing, mowing and using pesticides to control insects and diseases. A smaller lawn is less costly to maintain, easier to care for, and better for the environment. There are several key ways you can make the most of your lawn:

- Reduce the size of your lawn and create edge habitat – plant native shrubs and mini-gardens on lawn borders.
- Leave grass clippings on the lawn as mulch that will keep the lawn area moist.
- Use organic compost as an alternative to fertilizers. Add a thin layer (1/4 inch or less) in the spring by gently raking it into your lawn.
- Use a sharp mower blade to cut the grass and mow high – 3 inches. Dull blades tear grass, which causes stress.
- Maintain healthy soil – have it tested and adjust as needed to balance pH.
- Avoid pesticides and herbicides. Learn to live with a few imperfections, where grass simply won't thrive, look to alternative groundcovers.
- Gas powered lawnmowers emit 11 times more air pollution than a new car for each hour of operation. (US EPA). If your lawn is small enough, consider using a non-motorized push-mower. It's great exercise in addition to being environmentally-friendly!

Resources:

www.ecolandscaping.org

www.nativeplanttrust.org