



Eight Principles of Sustainable Landscaping



Sustainable can be such a “Blah” word. It suggests drip irrigation in a world where the colors of refracted sunshine in the wasted mist of an inefficient sprinkler system are more likely to appear in a Facebook photo. Yet sustainable landscaping, which affects far more than sprinklers, is a mechanism by which our generation and future generations will be able to co-exist with this planet in lasting and positive ways.

Missy Gable, Director of the University of California Master Gardener Program, offered eight principles of sustainable landscaping to a recent Master Gardener class, each of them designed to create “a way of living that meets the needs of

the present without impacting the needs of the future.” A look at the strategies suggested by her gives a good overview of this territory where ethics meets landscape practice.

1) **Landscape locally** - Choose the right plant for the right place. For instance, California natives and Mediterranean species are more likely to thrive in your North Valley yard. Avoid “zone denial” - that hopeful feeling that the pretty plant in the catalogue will “maybe” work for you, even though it’s recommended for Sunset’s Zone 23. Use WUCOLS (Water Use Classification of Landscape Species) which matches plant needs to water supply for over 3500 taxonomic plant groups in California. It’s detailed and specific to your city. I was glad to see Willows, where I live, in its database. The website is <http://ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS/>

2) **Nurture soils** - protect and feed them. To protect means to save topsoil, avoid compaction, prevent erosion, and mulch. Feed soils naturally using compost. Compost enhances plant growth and creates soil structure. Avoid synthetic, quick release fertilizers and minimize the use of unnecessary pesticide. The University of California I.P.M. (Integrated Pest Management) site has information on the least toxic ways to control pests. <http://ipm.ucdavis.edu>.

3) **Create wildlife habitat** - Embrace diversity and select California natives where possible. A pollinator garden (as exists behind the Gateway Science Museum in Chico) attracts a wide variety of flying do-gooders. The basic requirements for any habitat are food, water, and shelter. Bee hotels can encourage the native bee population, and denser plantings can provide shelter for other species. Kristine Green, a Glenn County Master Gardener, has created a habitat for California quail in her back yard using brush from prunings, fence posts, and braced limbs. She has planted redbuds, lilac, cotoneaster, forsythia, and bridal wreath spirea in her front yard to protect the quail from hawks and predatory cats, and to attract pollinators. She has created safe corridors for the quail to move from one side of the yard to the other, and even brought in some finer soil where the quail can “dust” themselves. After several years of work, families of quail started living on her property in 2010.

4) **Promote air and water quality** - Reduce fossil fuel consumption by buying locally, growing your own vegetables, and recycling plant debris on site. Avoid water runoff, both to save water and to reduce the contaminants that get into the ground from the water’s path across polluted surfaces. As much as 70% of rainwater and irrigation water leaves a developed landscape through surface water runoff.

5) **Send less to the landfill** - Choose plants that can grow in their allotted space. Avoid hedging and promote the natural shape and size of plants. Avoid invasive plants. Practice good plant maintenance by pruning correctly. Produce mulch on site,

6) **Conserve Water** - Create drought tolerant soils with compost and mulch. Learn the rules for utilizing graywater and use it appropriately. Implement hydrozoning - placing plants with similar water and sun

exposure needs together (on the same irrigation valve). The possibility of overwatering or under-watering neighboring plants will be reduced..

7) **Conserve energy** - Plant and protect trees to moderate building temperatures. Shade air conditioners. Shade heat islands. On a peripheral note, I once saw an elaborate drawing of rope and pulleys that was labeled "Solar Powered Clothes Dryer". It was an old fashioned clothes line. (Yes, I know this has nothing to do with landscaping, but we conserve energy where we can.)

8) **Grow food** - raised bed vegetable gardening and edible landscaping lead to decreased food miles as well as provide a nutrient rich food source. The advantages of "horticultural therapy" are well known. I remember the gleeful look on the face of a proper looking lady in a Master Gardening class who announced in a fierce voice, "I grow vegetables . . . I kill them . . . and I eat them."

I've been taught that change is inevitable. Naturally, we want positive change rather than negative (and remember, if you're coasting you're going downhill!) Sustainable landscaping for positive change requires study and work. The phrase implies hope. Efforts toward these eight principles are well worth our work. The labors of Missy Gable, Kristine Green and many others remind us that maybe sustainable isn't such a "Blah" word after all.

Submitted by: Bob Scoville, UC Master Gardener of Glenn County