

Green Gardens

A landscape of low-maintenance plants is an eco-friendly alternative to turf

by Hilda J. Brucker

THESE DAYS, having a truly green thumb means more than cultivating a perfect lawn or a lush flowerbed. For more and more gardening experts, it's about the realization that everything you do on your own plot of land has a direct impact on the planet. According to Roger Gettig, landscape conservation manager of the Holden Arboretum in Kirtland, Ohio, the ideal yard is a sustainable landscape of plants that thrive under local conditions without requiring copious amounts of chemicals, coddling, or irrigation.

"It goes back to clean water and clean air," Gettig says, explaining that almost anything we apply to the soil inevitably ends up in the water supply. According to the advocacy group Beyond Pesticides, U.S. home owners use over 100 million pounds of pesticides annually in their quest for that prizewinning rose or weed-free lawn. During hard rains, water runs off your lawn faster than it is absorbed, carrying residues from lawn chemicals with it. The contaminated runoff is channeled from storm drains into streams and lakes. "And this is the water you eventually drink or play in," Gettig says.

According to the EPA, storm water runoff is a major source of water pollution nationwide, one that many home owners contribute to through their ac-

tivities in the yard. As clean water becomes an increasingly precious resource, individuals and entire communities are redefining their standards of what constitutes a beautiful landscape.

Beauty in Imperfection

The notion of chemically induced perfection in our lawns and gardens is out-

she says. "When you use synthetic fertilizers you have to use more water because the plants are growing faster, and that produces more yard waste that someone has to cut or haul away — so you get yourself into this vicious cycle."

Striving to maintain a lawn of one single variety of grass also increases the need for fertilizers, weed killers, and pesticides. In nature, the sheer biodi-

versity of different plant types

helps maintain nutrients in the soil and keep pests from getting out of control.

This principle has led to a trend known as the "freedom lawn," proponents of which believe it's both practical and appealing to let plants like violets creep into your lawn. "Allowing yourself a certain amount of these so-called weeds is perfectly acceptable," says Gettig.

"My wife goes out and looks for dandelions in the lawn so she can add the spring greens to salad. Why not fill your lawn with crocus bulbs and enjoy the flowers before mowing the first time in spring?"

Waste Not, Want Not

Using satellite images and other data, researchers estimate there are more than 30 million acres of lawn in the United States, making grass the nation's largest irrigated crop. Environmentalists say these thirsty turf



dated, says horticulturalist Wendy Proud of Roger's Gardens, a California garden center specializing in eco-friendly products. She advocates using slow-release organic fertilizers, and applying them according to the label. "We're actually making more work for ourselves by wanting our gardens to be so perfect,"

grasses are an unsustainable choice, but there are alternatives.

The Southern Nevada Water Authority gives rebates of \$1.50 per square foot of sod replaced to home owners who convert their lawn to Xeriscape, a landscaping system that saves water through the use of appropriate plants and other methods. The SNWA encourages front-yard gardens composed of low-maintenance plants that thrive and bloom in desert conditions; its Web site lists more than 300 recommended choices.

Jodi Torpey's front yard stands out in bright contrast to the sea of suburban lawns in her Colorado neighborhood. She began removing sod during a drought in 2001, eventually taking out half her grass. "When I started digging, my neighbors thought I was installing a sprinkler system," she remembers. Today, her tiny, peanut-shaped lawn is edged with wide beds of drought-tolerant plants that include feathery pampas grass, spring bulbs, and black-eyed Susans. "I have flowers in three seasons, and it's the only yard around here like that. I get nice comments all the time," she says, adding that she drags the hose around as infrequently as possible.

In arid San Antonio, horticulturalist Mike Shoup maintains an organic display garden at his nursery, the Antique Rose Emporium. It's an unusual mixture — roses bloom in an explosion of color alongside cacti, yucca, and aloe. His goal is to demonstrate that older rose varieties are hardier and more sustainable than modern large-flowered hybrids.

New technologies are also helping to counteract emerging problems. Smart irrigation systems can now download local weather information from satellites, calculating variables like cloud cover, temperature, and precipitation. The payoff? Your garden gets just enough water to keep plants healthy, without wasting a drop. 

Writer Hilda J. Brucker is based in Atlanta.