

How to Naturescape

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Curious about native plants?
Interested in a beautiful, low-maintenance landscape? Concerned about health and water quality? Or did you just stumble on to this page by accident?

Regardless, we welcome you and hope we can satisfy or pique your curiosity. In the pages that follow, we will introduce some basic *Concepts* of landscaping with native plants, referred to by many as “naturescaping,” and follow that with *Steps* you can take to get started. Note that we will use the phrases “naturescaping” and “landscaping with native plants” interchangeably. You may also be familiar with the phrase “xeriscaping” which refers to landscaping with drought resistant plants, though not necessarily native plants.

In the *Concepts* below, we will discuss:

[“relearning” landscaping, traditional landscaping v. naturescaping,](#)
[the benefits of naturescaping,](#) and
[the “two-camps.”](#)

This is followed by the *Steps*, which are in turn followed by [Designing for Wildlife](#), [Special Considerations](#) (new home, hedges, bio-swales, etc.) and

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some [Examples](#). ... Ready? Here we go!

CONCEPTS

Relearning Landscaping

There is an element of “relearning” involved in naturescaping because throughout most of our lives we have been taught the opposite. We have been taught to remove native plants (often viewed as “weeds”) and to replace them with plants that are common in the nursery industry – plants that we will refer to as “industrial plants.” The industrial include the standard ornamental shrubs and perennials and are promoted based on the function they provide (hedge, groundcover, etc.) and/or the aesthetic they exhibit, yet not for ecological reasons. They are mass produced and distributed widely, the same way consumer goods are mass produced and distributed. As a result, landscapes, whether residential or commercial, typically have the same plants and the same appearance, regardless of where located – Maine, Texas, Oregon or some place in between?

We have been taught through gardening magazines, radio and television programs, newspaper features and nursery advertising that the industrial plants are *the* plants to use and that if a place (soil, climate, etc.) does not support them, then we should change the place: remove existing soil, bring in new soil, add irrigation, top dress with an ornamental mulch, and use pesticides and fertilizers as needed. The result is a rather sterile landscape that looks the same regardless of where you live. It is also a landscape that



Gardening Diva says “Try naturescaping! You’ll love it!”

Dynamic

Native landscapes are dynamic. Conventional landscapes are static. Static landscapes are characterized by a high percentage of evergreen plants and a maintenance regime that involves frequent cutting and trimming to maintain the desired “static” look.

Dynamic landscapes change with the season, and in natural cycles. And natural cycles include death. To an eye trained for a static landscape, the presence of dead plant material may be “unsightly.” If this is the case, the dead material can be removed. To some extent, in a true natural setting, some of this material would be removed by deer and other browsers.

Removing the dead material can be onerous and in our view it is unnecessary. Instead, we suggest a change in the perspective of the

unfortunately does not support our bird or beneficial insect populations.



Maine? Texas? Oregon?

We have also been taught to have a “weed” free lawn, to decrease biodiversity and to maintain our landscape through regular cuttings and the application of synthetic chemicals. It is interesting to note that radio gardening programs and other landscape “experts” often suggests a chemical solution to landscape “problems.” This practice is driven by advertisers who sell these products. Fortunately, there is an emerging shift towards organic yard care and many good groups are involved in the effort (including some master gardening programs), but there is a long way to go.

Thus, as we approach naturscaping, we have to purge a lot of the landscaping notions with which we grew up and be open to new ones. Some of those new ones are: selecting the plant that goes with the place and not changing the place for the plant; recognizing that we do not NEED all the lawn we have; and realizing that native plants take care of themselves because they evolved to grow in the place you want to plant them. Thus, we can let go of some of the old notions and rely more on practical or “common” sense.

Traditional Landscaping v. Naturscaping

observer, a change to recognize the natural beauty and seasonal significance of naturally dead material in a landscape. This dead material is an indicator of time and season and is from plants, alive underground, that will put forth new growth in the spring, renewing an age old natural cycle.

A dynamic look is different from a static one. A person starting a naturscape should be prepared for the look of natural cycles that will unfold before them.

Benefits

There are many benefits to naturscaping, whether practiced in place of or in addition to traditional landscaping. The benefits include, but are not limited to, the following which are expanded upon on our [Benefits Page](#):

1. Low Maintenance – Native plants evolved to grow in local conditions and to predictable sizes. They do not require watering (except during establishment), chemical pesticides and fertilizers, or frequent cutting.

2. Public Health (lowers cancer rates) – Traditional landscaping uses large amounts of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, some of which are suspected carcinogens. During rains, these chemicals often run off into public water supplies. Traditional landscaping also contributes to *air* and *noise* pollution.

3. Saves you Money – The cost of maintaining a naturscape is dramatically less than that of a traditional landscape because a naturscape essentially takes care of itself. Naturscapes also save you time – and how valuable is your time?

4. Water – In the West, 60% of consumed water goes to lawns; in the East, 30%. This water diversion harms the environment, kills fish, and returns polluted water to our streams and rivers. It also costs *you* – on irrigation system installation and maintenance, and on your water bill. .

Traditional landscaping attempts to create a landscape that “looks” the same regardless of location. This is, in part, pushed by nurseries or developers who want to sell the same plant or product across wide markets, maximizing revenue through efficiencies of scale. It is also driven by landscape designers and contractors who tend to use the same palette of plants regardless of location. This is particularly true of designers and contractors who move during their career. It may be seen as easier to change the site rather than learn which plants grow their naturally and how to install them.

Lastly, it is driven by homeowners and property managers who grew up learning one set of plants and understandably using those plants as a frame of reference as they move about the country. These and other forces have created an atmosphere that emphasizes using the same plants regardless of location and changing a site to accommodate these plants. As noted above, site changing often entails installing irrigation, removing the existing soil, bringing in new soil or a soil amendment, installing weed barrier, and applying synthetic chemicals. Plants are often planted in geometric patterns and maintained in a “static” look with frequent cutting or trimming. This is traditional landscaping.

5. Song Birds – Our song bird populations having dropped steadily – **5-10%, per year!**, depending on the species – for the last several decades, and there is no end in sight. The loss is primarily due to habitat loss. Adopting naturescaping is critical if song birds are to remain.

6. Enhances Livability – An ecologically functional landscape offers so much more than a sterile, static landscape. It offers imagination to our children, and color, sound and wonder to all of us. It is cleaner, quieter and healthier, and may increase property values.



Song Bird – Black Headed Grosbeak

The Two-Camps

In the text that follows we may refer to two different “camps” or “approaches” to naturescaping. These may be referred to as **conventional-appearance** and **restoration**, herein referred to as NS-conventional and NS-restoration, respectively. NS-conventional attempts to follow conventional landscape design principles (geometric patterns, monoculture or less diverse groundcover) and simply substitutes native plants for the industrial species. NS-restoration attempts to create a more natural looking space, planting plant communities as opposed to individual plant species and creating a look that reflects how the site may have looked prior to human disturbance. We encourage you to try both and



Land Change Brigade – on the charge!

Naturescaping, in contrast, emphasizes selecting the plant that grows naturally at the site. Since native plants evolved to grow under local conditions, they do not require that the site be changed. They do not need the life support of watering (except during establishment) or regular synthetic chemicals – they do not require fertilizer beyond that provided naturally and they are not prone to the diseases of many industrial plants.

Thus, in quick comparison, it can be said that traditional landscaping changes the place to accommodate the plant and naturescaping selects the plant that goes naturally with the place. Since we have been programmed for the former, it takes new thinking and perhaps some courage to consider the latter, though let us assure you that the latter is very rewarding ... beautiful in its own way, wondrous in the critters it attracts, healthier for the homeowner and larger environment and, once established, easier and less expensive to maintain.

even mix the two, depending on your preferences.

Remember that there is no right or wrong in naturescaping. You can try something and if you don't like it, consider it a learning experience and try something else. No matter what you do, in most instances, it is better than a turf lawn or a bed of industrial plants. Recall also that the underlying principle of naturescaping is to let natural systems work for you.

Good luck, have fun and keep that sense of humor! And send us your questions and/or suggestions so we know where the challenges lie.

Warm wishes from all of us at [PN](#).



Kalmia – A Native

Down Side?

Naturescaping sounds good, eh? Where do I sign up? ... Well, for your due diligence and our full disclosure, it is important to mention some of the challenges that one may face.

Twins v. Sibs

Most industrial plants are asexually propagated, i.e., grown from cuttings, etc., and, therefore, have identical genetic material. They will have similar shapes and height, the same way that two identical human twins will grow in the same manner. If you see one, you could pick the other out of a police line-up (i.e., you have a good idea what the other will look like).

Native plants, however, are like siblings, they are often sexually propagated and hence, their DNA, while similar, is not identical. Like siblings in a family, some may be tall, others short, some red-headed, some blue-eyed, etc. In other words, native plants possess greater genetic diversity and, as a result, less predictability of shape and size. Some people consider this a benefit that adds to a natural look and to the excitement and wonder of seeing how a plant will look as it matures. Others, however, may consider the reduced predictability a drawback, particularly

when implementing a landscape with
a well-defined geometric pattern.
