

Greener landscape maintenance can benefit your community association

Why should your community switch to greener landscape maintenance?

Heather Knoll, a community near Redmond, hired a sustainable landscaper for its common areas because residents were concerned about runoff from lawns draining into the nearby salmon stream. They also wanted to protect their children. "I have two young kids," said Kirsten Tully, a Heather Knoll board member. "They like to run up the hill and roll down the grass." She didn't want to worry about what they picked up from the lawn.

"People really liked it that we were going for an environmental company," Tully said. Heather Knoll hired Ridgeway Gardens. The company has removed weeds and pruned shrubs and trees to keep them healthy. They mulch mow and use natural products to maintain the lawns and shrub beds.

South Cove, on the shores of Lake Sammamish, switched to greener practices to protect both the lake and children playing in the park, said board member Dawn Matte. South Cove hired Signature Landscape Services. Signature's sustainable maintenance program uses organic fertilizers and minimal pesticides. They also mulch bed areas to help fertilize, suppress weeds and retain moisture.

"The results are overwhelmingly positive," said Matte. "The grass is vibrant, green and healthy with hardly any weeds."

Signature Landscape presented on sustainable landscape management at the 2008 CA Day. The company says this approach is not only good for the environment but can save money. For instance, irrigation system audits can increase efficiency and lower water bills.

"Sustainable" is becoming the way to do business.

Organic has gone mainstream, with Wal-Mart and other large retailers stocking organic products. The Garden Writers Association reports that gardeners are using fewer chemicals and are more concerned about environmentally sensitive gardening. Locally, those who preferred an environmentally friendly landscaper increased from 8% in 1998 to nearly 50% in 2002.

Some communities use green as a selling point. In Issaquah Highlands the "Living Green" approach has attracted home buyers who like the idea of living in a green community. Redmond Ridge's approach, "Inspired by Nature," also draws eco-friendly residents.

Concern about the environment is changing local requirements. In Washington state, new stormwater regulations require better control of runoff and pollutants such as pesticides and fertilizers on lawns.

The regulations are based on evidence of environmental harm. Scientists found 23 pesticides in local streams, five at levels high enough to harm aquatic life. The Puget Sound Partnership found that 1,000 lakes and streams in Puget Sound are “impaired.”

Water use is another issue. Eleven rivers in Puget Sound have too little water in summer for fish and wildlife. In summer, water use increases 35-45%, most of it for landscapes, and a third of that is wasted.

People are also concerned about children’s health. A University of Washington study tested 110 toddlers and found traces of pesticides in all but one. Children whose parents used garden pesticides had higher levels. Other studies have found that children have higher cancer risks than adults with the same exposure to pesticides. Pesticide exposure in the womb may also cause long-term harm to children.

What is natural landscape maintenance?

There are five main elements:

- Build the health of the soil through compost, mulch and organic fertilizers. This improves plant health.
- Plant right for your site and prune properly. Allowing plants to grow more naturally reduces pruning requirements and keeps them healthy.
- Practice smart watering.
- Limit pesticide use. Just spot spray weeds and problem areas. Don’t calendar spray or use weed and feed.
- Use mulch in planting beds to reduce weeds, conserve water and feed plants. Mulch mow to improve soil conditions, add fertility and reduce hauling costs.

Sustainable landscape maintenance may cost 16-19% more than traditional methods. “But you will probably save money or at least break even in the long run,” said Lisa Niehaus from King County EnviroStars. When you stop hauling clippings, retain leaves as mulch in your beds, water more efficiently and prune properly, maintenance costs are lower.

How to choose a natural landscape firm?

EnviroStars, a program to help people identify and support environmentally responsible businesses, has published a list of sustainable landscapers at www.envirostars.org. Niehaus said help is available to work through the process of hiring a greener landscaper. You can contact her at 206-263-3046 or lisa.niehaus@kingcounty.gov.

Help is also available on line from Seattle Public Utilities. Healthy landscape guidelines, sample language for landscape maintenance plans, standards and specifications, and more can be found at www.seattle.gov/util/Services/Yard/For_Landscape_Professionals.