



INTRO TO ECO-*gardening*

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Summer yard work usually involves sweltering under the sun to weed, water and battle bugs. But when you design your outdoor space in an eco-friendly manner, you can stay out of the heat and still have a gorgeous garden.

Call it ecological landscaping, sustainable gardening or naturescaping, the concept is the same: A garden that causes minimal environmental impact benefits you, the plants and the planet.

Can changing your growing practices really make a difference

to the environment? "Your house just happens to be plunked in the middle of a living, integrated system," says M. L. Altobelli, eco-marketplace coordinator for the Concord, MA-based Ecological Landscaping Association. "The experts say 'one yard at a time,' and they mean it. You can have a huge impact."

Whether you have an acre of land or a tiny flower patch, here are the four keys to getting your garden in balance with nature and making your green space, well, greener.

1. PICK THE RIGHT PLANTS FOR YOUR PART OF THE WORLD

This is the cardinal rule of ecological landscaping. Plants acclimated to the growing conditions where you live require less maintenance because they thrive on local averages of sun exposure, temperatures and water levels. Nonnative and exotic plants can flourish without harming the native ecology, as long as they're from similar climate zones. Take orange trees. They aren't indigenous to Florida, but they thrive in the state's heat and humidity—the orange blossom was even made the state flower.

Just be sure the nonnative plant you're interested in won't become a space invader that requires constant pulling or trimming. For instance, English Ivy may look like a lush green carpet that doesn't require mowing, but it grows rapidly, can smother plants and is exceptionally resistant to efforts to eradicate it.

Want a yard full of birds or butterflies? Choosing indigenous plants also benefits local wildlife, which turn to familiar, native plants as sources of food and shelter. "Naturescaping" is putting the nature back in landscapes," explains Diana Guidry, national wildlife habitat steward and outreach coordinator for the NatureScape Broward program in Broward County, FL.

If you live in a dry region, don't just landscape, *xeriscape*. Opting for water-conserving plants, called xeriscaping, cuts down on water use (which means less time under the hot sun waving a hose) and conserves ground nutrients so you won't need fertilizer to replenish the soil. "A xeriscaped plant doesn't need a lot of added nutrients," says Amy Whitworth, garden designer and owner of Plan-It-Earth Design in Portland, OR.

• **To learn more:** Log on to the US Department of Agriculture's website to find a local extension office near you (csrees.usda.gov/Extension), contact a native plant society in your area (find one at michbotclub.org/links/native_plant_society.htm) or check out the California Integrated Waste Management Board's info on xeriscaping (ciwmb.ca.gov/organics/Xeriscaping).

2. INCORPORATE PROTECTIVE GARDEN PATCHES

For centuries, landscaping hasn't been used simply to please the eye, it has also acted as environmental protection: Trees provide shade, lawns and hedges prevent erosion, and ditches guide storm-water runoff. "Rain gardens"—bowl-shaped depressions planted with native perennials—are a landscaping tool designed to absorb runoff and provide a natural filter for rainwater. Rain gardens should be planted in muddy areas where water collects after a heavy rain, or in the path of storm runoff (the temporary stream that forms after it rains to take excess water to lower ground or a sewer drain). Some utility companies even offer incentives for this kind of water conservation. For example, homeowners in Portland, OR, can receive a rebate of up to \$5.88 each month if they invest in storm-water management systems, including rain gardens.

If water isn't a concern but erosion is, the most effective tool to fight it is

perennial vegetation—which includes grass, ivy, runner plants (like juniper and rosemary) and other ground covers, says Craig Cramer, communications specialist with Cornell University's Department of Horticulture. For steep slopes, the ground can be terraced to create flat "steps," which can then be landscaped.

• **To learn more:** Visit the Rain Garden Network website for ideas (raingardennetwork.com). Ask your local nursery about low-growing and spreading plants for ground cover.

3. WORK OUT A WATER PLAN

Even a garden filled with water-retaining succulents will need liquid nourishment once in a while—especially when those summer heat waves hit. The best way to keep your plants hydrated without tapping into the city water supply? Collect runoff from your house in rain barrels. Recent barrel models (\$100 to \$280; cleanairgardening.com) are unobtrusive and come equipped with filters and spigots that make watering

TAKE THIS DOWN!

A garden journal is an invaluable tool for creating a green space that's eco-friendly and enjoyable. M. L. Altobelli, eco-marketplace coordinator for the Concord, MA-based Ecological Landscaping Association, says it takes a minimum of three years to fully transition a chemically managed lawn over to an eco-friendly one, so the journal can be your before-and-after testimony while helping you wait out the changes. Keep note of these things in your journal:

1. OBJECTIVE

What kind of space do you want to create? An aromatic meditation garden, a wide green turf or a soft carpet of moss? Fill a page or so with your garden fantasies, then, to make sure that your objective makes sense for your climate and level of sun or shade, contact your local cooperative extension office or land-grant university.

2. CARE LOG

Starting right now, make a note each time you water, fertilize or get rid of bugs in your garden. How effective are your efforts? Over time, you'll see patterns emerging that will show you what works, what doesn't, what plants need the least care, and which ones aren't worth the energy.

3. WISH LIST

Research plants that are a good fit for your objective. When you visit a nursery, take notes—it can be hard to remember what you saw after you've looked at rows of flowers and ground covers. Contact the local chapter of the Audubon Society (audubon.org) to find out its recommendations for attracting birds and butterflies.

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LIFE

planet home

plants easy. Thirsty garden plants actually grow better when they drink rainwater because it doesn't contain the chemical additives (such as chlorine and fluoride) in tap water.

• **To learn more:** Log on to rainbarrelguide.com to read comparisons, join discussions and find links to related websites.

4. ELIMINATE PESTICIDES AND FERTILIZERS

Chemical treatments may be the mainstay of conventional lawn and garden care, but Altobelli warns of the dangers to healthy soil. "Lawns that have been chemically managed for two years or more have a skewed microbial population," she says, which means healthy organisms have been eliminated from the microscopic ecosystem in the dirt. After five years, chemical pesticides will have sterilized the lawn, leaving very few beneficial microbes. These chemicals don't just stay in one yard, they seep into groundwater and can be swept into lakes and rivers by runoff.

But how can you protect plants from natural predators? Rather than



Raid-ing the yard, raid your kitchen cupboard. A simple soap spray (1 Tbs. dish soap to 1 qt. water) can kill leaf-chomping aphids, mealy bugs and mites. A solution made with canola or soybean oil and water mimics horticultural oils to keep pests from returning. Vinegar poured onto weeds will dry them out faster than Roundup. Just be careful—these home remedies can change the soil's pH and make the area inhospitable to beneficial organisms.

Commercial fertilizer is another product your garden can do without. Homemade compost works as well, if not better—without the toxic hazards. (Check out "Composting 101" on vegetariantimes.com to learn specifics on getting started.) For a quick fix, or while you wait for your own compost to mature, just spread borders and flowerbeds with grass clippings. If your green space starts to need nourishment, give it an extra jolt with an organic fertilizer that provides natural, not synthetic, nutrients.

Finally, plant choice (we said it was the cardinal rule, remember?) can play a big role in pest control. For example, lavender bushes and nasturtiums are among the many flowering summer options that not only deter bugs and even foraging deer, they also thrive in poor soil, meaning there's almost never a need to fertilize or fight insects. And that's the ultimate goal: Creating a green space that takes care of itself and the surrounding environment—so you can sit back and enjoy the scenery. ■

To find out more

For more general info on naturescaping, check out these resources:

National Wildlife Federation
nwf.org/backyard

The Ecological Landscaping Association
ecolandscaping.org

NatureScape Broward
broward.org/naturescape