

Working to create beneficial landscapes in backyards

By the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

When we look at our own backyard it can be difficult imagining our actions there having much impact on others –except for maybe the next door neighbor.

Yet what we do there really does matter, far beyond the property line. Though we may not realize it, our developed landscapes are part of the ecosystem, and how we create and maintain them determines whether their contributions are positive or negative.

Sadly, the list of negative impacts of many current landscaping practices is long, including flooding, erosion, air, noise and water pollution, excessive consumption of natural resources, reduction in biodiversity and high costs in time and dollars. Yet many of these impacts are difficult to see or gauge, making them also easy to ignore.

The good news is that if we make wise choices, our landscapes can offer all of the following: shade, habitat, pollinators, natural pest controls, fertile and stable soil, clean air and water and a range of psychological benefits. Well-designed and managed landscapes also sequester carbon and are generally healthier, functional, productive, attractive and resilient.

The best teacher in our quest for these benefits is nature itself. Natural landscapes are incredibly diverse and efficient, wasting nothing in closed-loop systems. By mimicking nature, and working with it rather than against it, we can make our landscapes more beneficial. The following strategies are a good starting point.

- Use resources wisely and efficiently. Much of the water, fertilizer and pest controls we apply to our landscapes are wasted or not necessary in the first place. Use the “as needed” approach instead of “more is better.”
- To make mowing faster and easier and return nutrients to the soil, try “grasscycling” and leave the clippings on the lawn.
- Consider reducing the size of your lawn, the most energy and resource demanding part of any landscape, and replace that space with a productive garden or low-maintenance ornamentals.
- Diversify and plant more natives, which are easier to grow with minimal maintenance. They also offer more benefit to native insects, birds and other creatures. Having evolved together, they provide exactly what the other needs, from food and nutrients to pest control, pollination and seed dispersal.
- Reduce runoff and hold moisture by improving soil, mulching, planting deep-rooted natives and installing rain gardens, rain barrels and porous pavement.
- Turn yard and kitchen “waste” into valuable compost.
- Strive less for unachievable, unnatural “perfection” and strive more to treat your landscape as the dynamic part of nature that it is.