

# Checklist for Landscaping Nature's Way

-by Dennis "Whitey" Lueck (August 1996)

Most conventional landscapes in urban and suburban areas are designed, installed, and maintained as if Nature doesn't really matter. As attractive as they sometimes are, such landscapes participate very little in the surrounding natural environment, or whatever is left of it. And their monetary, environmental, and social costs are considerable.

Thank goodness there's another way: Nature's Way! This approach provides for the needs of human beings (food production, beauty, etc.) while also maintaining or restoring the healthy natural environment that many other plants and animals call home, and on which our own health (physical, mental, and spiritual) depends. After all, what's good for the rest of Nature is good for us, too; we're all in this together.

To determine to what degree a particular landscape contributes to, or detracts from, its natural environment, see how it rates using the criteria below. For each criterion, put a *two* in the box if, in your estimation, the landscape does a good job of addressing this issue; put a *one* in the box if you think it does just a *fair* job; and put a *zero* in the box if it does a *poor* job.

**2 = GOOD job**

**1 = FAIR job**

**0 = POOR job**

**I. OVERALL PHILOSOPHY:** The landscape appears to work *with*, not *against*, Nature.

- A. Humans appear to play the role of partners *with* Nature, not masters *of* it.
- B. The landscape appears to be *a part of* its natural environment; it is not set *apart from* that same rich environment.
- C. The site appears welcoming to many kinds of creatures, not just humans.
- D. The landscape's stewards seem to acknowledge that the landscape will change over time (from season to season, as well as from year to year) and that their role is to orchestrate and accommodate those changes, not to prevent them from happening.

**II. DESIGN AND AESTHETICS:** The landscape is attractive without being ostentatious; it is subtle rather than showy or spectacular; and its effect on the viewer is comforting rather than unsettling.

- A. Plants, not structures (e.g., fences), are used to define spaces.
- B. The overall design is informal rather than formal.
- C. Plants are not arranged in lines nor evenly spaced one from the other.

**III. PLANT SELECTION:** Decisions appear to be based not just on beauty, novelty, and spectacle, but also on the various ecological roles the plant will play.

- A. Except for the vegetable and fruit gardens, most of the landscape's plants could occur naturally on the site and perpetuate themselves with little human intervention. In other words, "native" plants predominate.
- B. Appropriate plants have been chosen based on the site's soil type, the site's natural hydrology, and the amount of insolation (sun versus shade).

(continued)

**IV. SOILS AND GROWDCOVERS:** To the greatest extent possible, this landscape acknowledges that plants protect the soil, that natural precipitation deserves to penetrate to the aquifer, and that turf (if it exists at all) should be a lively little ecosystem instead of a biologically sterile, green mat.

- A. Because a landscape's overall health is a reflection of the health of the soil it grows in, every effort is made to preserve and protect that soil and its important inhabitants (invertebrates and others, including moles). Materials that extinguish life in the soil (e.g., black plastic and "new, improved" versions of it such as "landscape cloth" and "geotextile") are used only where there are no plants (e.g., in walkways).
- B. Virtually every square foot of soil is protected either with living plants, or with dead leaves or other organic matter.
- C. Most precipitation that falls on this site stays here; impervious surfaces do not dominate the landscape and they do not direct precipitation off-site or to the storm sewer.
- D. Turf-covered areas are limited in size and include a *variety* of grasses and other plants rather than a grass monoculture; they receive neither fertilizers nor pesticides; and they require very infrequent mowing (or none at all) during the summer drought.

**V. MAINTENANCE:** The landscape appears to be cared for gently and lovingly. It never appears to "demand" attention; rather, it looks as if it pretty much takes care of itself (in fact, it probably does!).

- A. Most maintenance tasks are accomplished quietly without using power tools and fossil fuels.
- B. The landscape is self-sustaining. Organic material (grass clippings, prunings, leaves, etc.) does not leave the site, and neither is there any addition of such material (e.g., bark mulch, leaves, compost) from off-site sources. Organic matter and nutrients are recycled naturally (e.g., fallen leaves are left to lie beneath the plants they fell from) or in on-site compost silos.
- C. Pruning of woody plants is relatively infrequent and scarcely noticeable (i.e., most plants are "renewal pruned," removing a few old stems every winter at the base of the plant). No plant ever gets "too big" because each plant was selected to fit the site for as long as it lives.
- D. Supplemental irrigation is limited to intensively cultivated areas (vegetables, fruits, and "ornamental" plants). Non-cultivated areas get along with no irrigation or, at most, a once-a-month drink during the summer drought.
- E. Weeds are not a problem because every square foot of soil is covered with either "wanted" plants or dead leaves, and herbicides are strictly taboo.

**TOTAL POINTS:** \_\_\_\_\_

25-36 points: Thank you for your Nature-friendly stewardship!

13-24 points: Lots of room for improvement...

0-12 points: Please consider joining a support group to learn how to be more charitable toward other forms of Life.



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