

# Creating and Caring for Landscapes that Really Work

---

- by Whitey Lueck (October 2000)

**Think:** Before reaching for a tool, a pesticide, or your checkbook, consider other options (including “no action”) before proceeding. Ideally, the path you select should eliminate, not perpetuate, the landscape problem you have.

**Eliminate weed-friendly areas:** Every square foot of a site should be covered with wanted plants or with dead leaves (which effectively deter weeds). Areas of open soil and those covered with fine-textured mulches such as bark mulch are just asking for trouble (i.e., weeds). Minimize soil disturbance, as it, too, just creates a weed-friendly environment.

**Use ecological succession to your advantage:** A healthy landscape is constantly changing. West of the Cascades, most areas, if left undisturbed, will over time become forested. So start by planting trees. Introduce shrubs and herbaceous plants later, once the tree canopy has begun to develop. Some plants will, of course, arrive on their own, by wind and by bird, from nearby natural areas (if there are any). Use a light hand to help orchestrate these changes, rather than a heavy hand to try to prevent them from happening altogether. If you do wish to keep a site from becoming forested, recognize that such an approach will require constant human intervention through the years.



**Plant both conifers and broadleaf trees (and put away those rakes):** Besides providing a host of wonderful benefits for humans and many other creatures, trees shade out many undesirable plants. And fallen leaves recycle nutrients right on-site and help restore soil health.

**Introduce site-appropriate, regionally native plants:** Examine nearby natural areas to determine what plants might do best on your site (considering soil type, hydrology, and amount of sun/shade). Although some existing plants may need to be removed initially, there are usually plenty of available sites where new plants can be introduced, even in established landscapes. Over time, then, older plants that were less site-appropriate can be removed without creating large gaps.

**Plant a variety of plants and plant them in an irregular pattern:** Even under the best of circumstances, it is only natural that some plants will fail to thrive, or just die. By avoiding straight lines and masses of identical plants, you ensure that any individual that languishes or dies will be less noticeable. And should disease or insects strike, you ensure that your entire planting will not be lost.

**Fill in the gaps with annuals or low-growing legumes:** Self-reseeding annuals such as California poppy and crimson clover can protect open areas of a recently landscaped site until newly

(continued)

planted woody vegetation begins to produce shade. These annuals prevent weeds from moving in and, as the site becomes more shaded, will eventually disappear. You can also seed new landscapes with low-growing, perennial legumes such as birdsfoot trefoil and white clover that, over time, will also disappear.

Rethink lawn-covered areas: Lawns can range from extremely high maintenance (grass species only, irrigated, and manicured) to relatively low-maintenance (multiple species of grasses and other plants such as lawn-daisies and clover; no irrigation; infrequent mowing). The more plant species in a lawn, the healthier the little ecosystem that develops there. Consider converting some lawn areas to “meadows” that are mowed just once a year, thus providing wonderful habitat for all kinds of beneficial insects, birds, and other creatures. Where large areas that include fencelines and trees must be mowed, leave broad swaths of unmowed grass along the fencelines and around the trees so these areas look purposefully unmowed rather than just missed by careless mower operators.



Robin Hostick

Approach weed removal and pruning in a light-handed way: Try to disturb the soil as little as possible. Leave pulled and cut weeds lie where they are on the site (unless they've reached the seed-producing stage); this eliminates the cost of off-site composting. Time your work to catch weeds at their most vulnerable moment (e.g., cut back new blackberry growth in early summer). Select woody plants and space them so they can develop without constant need for pruning. When you do need to prune, leave the prunings on-site (under shrubs and snipped into smaller pieces, if necessary).

Monitor your landscape at regular intervals: See what is working in your landscape, and what is not, and make adjustments accordingly. Keep a journal of what you do and when you do it, to learn what approaches are most effective in your area.

Be creative and have fun: Your time on the planet is short, so try not to waste it on repetitive tasks and ineffective or futile approaches that make your life dull and unsatisfying. If your supervisor asks you to prune the same shrubs year after year, just because they “need to be pruned,” ask yourself and your supervisor if there is not a better use of your skills and your time.

Recognize that the landscapes we build and care for around us are a reflection of ourselves: Are they barren and relatively lifeless expanses of grass and asphalt that require constant attention, or are they attractive, productive plant and animal communities that mostly take care of themselves?

Understand that healthy landscapes take time to develop: Our tendency these days toward “instant landscapes” (e.g., three rhododendrons, a couple bags of bark mulch, and an hour's work) ignores the fact that landscapes that really work take time to develop. So relax, and enjoy watching your new trees grow!



Whitey Lueck is a horticulturist and plant ecologist in Eugene, Oregon.  
This list is reprinted by NCAP with his permission.