

Making “Green” Sense

BY JOHN IMES

Today’s sophisticated home buyer is becoming increasingly aware of environmental issues as they relate to home building. Buyers want affordable, quality-built homes that are also healthier, safer, more comfortable and durable, energy efficient and environmentally responsible.

Since 1999, the Green Built Home program has been providing Wisconsin homeowners and builders with information on incorporating environmentally sensitive practices throughout the home design and construction process.

Making sense of the latest green building design, technology and materials, and deciding which measures are most important can be a difficult task. In each issue of “Green Sense,” we’ll identify a particular “green building” priority, help you get the most “green” for the money, and we’ll offer a few sample strategies for “greening” your own home.

Great landscapes through native landscaping and conservation

Do you want to avoid slaving over your lawn, spending countless hours mowing, fertilizing and watering? Do you want an attractive landscape that’s low maintenance and low cost, yet one that remains beautiful throughout the seasons? Then you might want to consider native landscaping and conservation practices for your yard.

What homeowners do with their yards can have a significant impact on the environment. For example, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, an inefficient gas-powered lawnmower emits over 11 times as much pollution as a car does for each hour it runs. Turf lawns also consume 30-60 percent of the water used in urban areas. As residents of a community with so many beautiful lakes, many of us are familiar with the problems

of algae blooms that result from storm water and fertilizer runoff. Not to mention that over \$5 billion is spent on lawn fertilizers each year.

Native plants save time, water and money and reduce pollution, but they also offer additional benefits. Native landscapes offer food and much-needed habitat for songbirds and butterflies and will certainly attract both to your yard. Many native plants have deep root systems that allow them to draw water down into the soil, helping to reduce runoff and flooding. Finally, gardeners working with native plants act as curators of our natural heritage,

particularly as only a few original Wisconsin prairie remnants remain intact.

Perhaps you’re ready to try a small native planting — where do you start? The most important aspect of native landscaping is choosing plants appropriate for the site. Some plants are better suited to hot, dry, sunny sites, while others prefer cool, shaded or moist sites. Plants best adapted to a particular site will need little encouragement to thrive. Native plants typically grow in “communities” — groups of plants that evolve together and that have adapted to specific site conditions (moisture, sunlight, etc.). The

UW Arboretum and local garden stores have planting guides and other resources to help you learn about the different plants and communities, and how they can be recreated. Of course, different plants flower at different times of the year, so it is possible to create a planting that will be continuously in bloom, offering beauty and interest that spans the seasons.

Planting a rain garden

Polluted run-off is a major problem in urban areas where streets, sidewalks and buildings are designed to shunt water off their

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Rain gardens may be fashioned in any shape or size, and plantings can be simple or sophisticated.

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surfaces as quickly as possible. Impervious surfaces create streams of water that wash away oil, heavy metals, pesticides and fertilizers from city streets and suburban lawns. This water goes into storm drains and from there, directly into lakes, streams and rivers without treatment. As urban and suburban areas grow, the volume of pollutants grows. Wetlands act as living filtration systems to remove such pollutants from the water, but it is very difficult, if not impossible to create wetlands in highly developed areas. Rain gardens can act as mini-wetlands, absorbing and cleaning water that runs off sidewalks, driveways and roofs.

While the process by which rain garden plants clean the water may be complicated, designing and installing a rain garden is simple:

1. Choose a location that typically receives a lot of water — areas next to paved

surfaces, near downspouts or under rain gutters. This collects water from impervious surfaces that would otherwise run off.

2. Dig a shallow depression in your chosen location to help channel the water into your garden and irrigate the plants. If you are placing the garden next to your house, dig the depression to channel water away from your house to prevent leakage into your basement.
3. Plant the depression with native, water-loving plants. Native plants are well adapted to our local climate, and will need less care in the long run. You can plant a combination of shrubs and flowers and there are many different species to choose from. In Wisconsin, Blueflag Iris, Great Blue Lobelia and Cardinal Flower can be planted together to make a bright and colorful rain garden that enjoys lots of sun.

Pussy Willow, Red-Osier Dogwood and Black Chokeberry are some of the possible shrub choices that would do well in our climate.

Native landscaping can offer today's sophisticated home owner all the benefits of a great landscape: low maintenance and low cost, beautiful aesthetics and seasonal interest. When you combine that with environmental benefits such as reduced polluted runoff into our lakes and streams, fewer algae blooms, and more wildlife, you really are making "green" sense! ■

Resources for further information

The UW Extension offers a helpful brochure on rain gardens, available by calling 608-262-3346 (or toll-free at 877-947-7827). You can also view the brochure online at: <http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/raingarden>.

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