Neighborhood Friendly Landscapes

Avoiding Weed Wars: Strategies for Success

As water quality and habitat loss become more compelling issues, people are being drawn to the idea of a more natural approach to landscaping. Natural landscapes, also referred to as habitat gardens, consist mainly of native plants. Recently these same landscapes have been met with resistance, often as a result of miscommunication and misinformation. Despite good intentions, conflicts within a neighborhood, with cities or homeowner associations may occur, but need not be inevitable.

Natural landscapes can take many forms, from the rather wild and unkempt to a more traditional, more manicured design. What is important, however, is being mindful of the ordinances, deed restrictions, laws or policies of the location in which the landscape exists or will be created.

Laws are changing; cities and homeowner associations are becoming more sensitive to environmental issues, but many still rely on outdated concepts and laws. Use legal recourse as a last resort. Choosing an antagonistic approach is not the best way to win support or approval, but promoting a spirit of cooperation and good will is.

Following are some ideas for implementing strategies that foster communication, education and can help avoid confrontation before, during and after the installation of the natural landscape.

Be Proactive

Understand landscape ordinance and deed restrictions before you begin. Be proactive. Before creating the natural landscape, read copies of the local landscape ordinances or deed restrictions and become familiar with the process of applying for a variance or permit should these be necessary. These are readily available from city parks department, homeowner association offices or property management company offices. Also, understand that the appeal process as well. Sometimes this may be as simple as a phone call.

Learn about “natural” landscapes both by definition and function. Being able to communicate what is or will be accomplished with the landscape will help to explain the “why” questions. This will also provide an excellent opportunity to win support and possible converts.

Find opportunities to inform others by word and example. Participate at homeowner association or community association meetings, welcome questions from neighbors and create a landscape that others will want to use as an example.
Tips and Tricks
There are strategies that can be taken within the landscape that can maximize communication and education while minimizing or eliminating confrontation.

- **Make a gradual change.** This could begin by including some well placed native plants in the border. A next step might be to gradually enlarge the landscape beds on a yearly basis, thus avoiding negative feedback from skeptics.

- **Communicate with neighbors.** Let them know what the plans will be and keep a dialogue positive. This could include keeping neighbors updated as the landscape progresses. Also, welcoming neighborhood children to hear information about the landscape can generate excitement that will be transmitted to the adults.

- **Use identification tags on plants if possible.** Neighbors will want to know the names of the plants. Those who are unfamiliar with native plants may well consider them “different” looking. Plant tags will also add an element of prominence to the landscape and offer an instant source of education.

- **Create borders or setbacks.** A neat and tidy edge will create the appearance of an order, even if its ordered chaos! A setback will help prevent plant material from hanging over curbs or sidewalks.

- **Practice tolerance.** Recognize and acknowledge neighbors choice in plant selections. Arrogance will not win converts.

- **Avoid straight lines and hard edges.** Creating pleasing, curved planting beds enhances the natural look of the landscapes and incorporates good basic landscape design.

- **Think “plant communities”**. Choosing a variety of plants found in naturally occurring areas such as wetlands, prairies, or shaded forest and incorporating them in groups create planting zones. These zones will require similar light and moisture requirements.

- **Plant in masses for visual impact.** Native plants are sometimes not as showy as traditional landscape plants. Planting the in masses offers eye-catching interest.

- **Vary plant selection size, color and texture.** A more interesting and visually appealing landscape is achieved when plants with varying characteristics are planted together to form a rich tapestry.

- **Add structural interest.** Including garden structures, bird baths or even sculpture will add a personal signature to the landscape.

- **Practice proper maintenance.** Above all follow good maintenance practices. Allowing the natural landscape to succumb to a “vacant lot” look will not create a climate of understanding or acceptance.

Keep in mind the ultimate goal when choosing to have a natural landscape area.

By setting an example through good communication, information and proper maintenance practices, “weed wars” can be avoided.