



Six Simple Steps to a “Smart Yard”

by Garry Menendez - July 2014

Not so long ago, it was considered fashionable to be “green” or environmentally aware. Today, it is expected. Recycling is at an all-time high and the efficiency of our vehicles is rapidly climbing. With regard to our surroundings, landscapes and gardens, there has been a lot of talk about how to tread more lightly, but frankly, much of that information seems to be ignored as we cling to the status quo of our suburban standards and complacently settle to be like the Joneses.

Any of the topics that follow may in themselves be the subject of a detailed article. The purpose of this article is to demystify and orient you in the direction of some simple steps toward creating a smarter, “greener” yard.

1. Change Your Perspective

One of the simplest ways to lessen the environmental impact of your yard or garden is to begin to change the way you think.

Over the years, it seems as if we have shifted our focus from plants to mulch. Considering that the purpose of mulch is to suppress weeds, maintain moisture and moderate temperature, it seems odd that it has become such a dominant feature. Ask yourself if it's really necessary to rake your beds down to the bare earth in order to prepare for a new application of purchased mulch. If you're lucky enough to have some trees on your property, you should view their fall leaf-drop as a gift. The leaves may need to be broken down a bit with a shredder or mower, but for the most part, there is no substitute for natural leaf mulch. It's light, breathable, won't change the pH of your soil and it's free!

Another simple step is to make your garden more appealing to birds and wildlife. Don't be too quick to cut back perennials and ornamental grasses. While your neighbors may be anxious to “prepare” their yards for winter by cutting back anything more than 6 inches tall, you may want to keep the shears in the shed for a while longer. The seedheads from *Rudbeckia* and coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.) are excellent food sources for finches, chickadees and other small birds. Ornamental grasses are at their best through the fall and winter, and cutting them back before they have a chance to shine is akin to leaving the fireworks show before the finale.

The world-renowned horticulturist and garden designer Piet Oudolf states in his book *Designing With Plants* that a real plant lover allows his or her plants to “die gracefully.” Not only are you stealing a food source, but also many of these gorgeous perennials may look stunning in an early morning fall frost, and when backlit by a low sun, there are few prettier sights. If adding new perennials to your garden, do some research before you purchase and seek out sturdier cultivars that may hold up better to snow, ice and winter conditions.

2. Wild Pockets

Right along with changing your perspective, you may want to consider keeping sharp objects away ... from yourself! That’s right. You can have a smarter, more Earth-friendly yard by taking it easy.

Humans have always had an obsession with controlling nature. This may have been justified when settlers from Europe first came to the woodsy New World. After all, they had to clear acreage for crops and livestock. More recently in the grand palaces of England and France, entire villages were wiped clean to make way for vast, formal gardens in order to show power and impress. But we now live in a different time and world. Our food is readily available from the grocery store and our palaces are on a much smaller scale.

If you are lucky enough to have a sizable piece a property *and* some of your trees and understory plants were lucky enough to escape the blade of the dozer when your home was built, consider allowing these pockets of green to remain. View your house as the center of a bull’s-eye on a dartboard. Should you have a larger piece of land (more than an acre), as you radiate away from your home, the degree of control should become less until you have “wildness” on the fringes. Sara Stein speaks of “wildlife corridors” in her acclaimed book *Noah’s Garden*. These are the buffer zones and uncontrolled landscapes straddling property lines. With the vast amount of development taking place in our quest to leapfrog and sprawl away from city centers, these vegetative respites are the perfect way for critters and birds to remain part of our modern world and as a result, are allowed to migrate along these green corridors.



A “wild pocket” is sometimes defined as a spot where the developer couldn’t get his equipment. Such thickets are perfect for attracting wildlife of all kinds.²

3. Build Your Beds

Whenever I mine the “black gold” from my compost bin each spring, I consistently wonder, “Why doesn’t everyone do this?” I am the type of person who seeks out the recycling bin when finishing a beverage at someone else’s home, or I’ll take the empty container home to mine. The same compulsion should exist when we clean out the crisper or unwisely decide to bag our lawn clippings. In addition to these natural materials, shredded documents may be added to the compost mix with the assurance that at least no one will attempt to steal your identity *that* way.

The biggest myth associated with having a compost bin is that it smells terrible. Wrong. If you pay attention to the blend of materials (and go easy on the grass clippings), you shouldn’t have a problem with odor. However, it should be said that you also want your composting area to be located somewhat away from outdoor living spaces, yet be convenient enough not to be a major trek from your kitchen. Some may argue, as well, that since they don’t have a vegetable garden, there is no need for compost. However, properly aged compost may be used in flowerbeds, containers, as a soil amendment when planting *anything* and even as a top-dressing when overseeding bare lawn areas.



A creative and attractive compost bin allows you to manufacture your own “black gold.”¹

While there are many online resources trumpeting the benefits and methods of composting, I will add one simple word of advice ... air. I have learned through much trial and error that if you can get air to your pile, you will drastically speed up decomposition. I have what many would consider a major challenge adjacent to my compost bin ... bamboo. In an effort to keep this stuff from growing up through my pile, I created a concrete floor, surrounded the base with metal flashing *and* elevated the pile with the help of some strong wire mesh. Sounds like a lot of work, but I could not be happier with the result. We throw everything in the bin and nothing ever sprouts, *and* the “finished” product naturally falls through to the concrete floor, making it easy to pull out with a garden hoe for use. Magic!

4. Become a Rain Hog

If one were to search the web for the term “rain garden,” they would be greeted by more than 180 million suggestions, an overwhelming amount of information considering that only 20 years ago so few would have had a clue what the term meant. The vastly different methods of capturing and reusing rainwater range from complexly engineered cisterns and storage devices to a simple rain barrel.

Most folks are quick to seek out a spot on which to locate a rain garden when in reality, it is the entire property that should be considered. Rooftops, driveways, patios, gardens and lawns all have the opportunity to slow down and absorb moisture. The main objective is to claim and appreciate that which falls from the clouds. The days of promoting the out of sight, out of mind approach for dealing with storm water have passed. Allowing the water table (subsurface groundwater) beneath our very feet to be recharged is far better than piping this precious resource to streams, creeks or a pond miles away.

The three simplest ways for an average homeowner to become a water miser are as follows:

1. Attach rain barrels to one or more of your gutter downspouts. It won't take long to fill a 55-gallon barrel, so plan to allow the overflow to be captured as well, or have your overflow piped to adjacent plantings that can tolerate the moisture. Make sure you elevate the device to allow watering cans and/or buckets to be placed beneath the spigot.

The irony with having a rain barrel is that for several days following a rain event, all of the plants have been well watered and the rain barrel may be forgotten. When the next dry spell hits, many are quick to go back to the hose or faucet, so tie a ribbon or other reminder on your spigot to remind yourself of your resourcefulness.



This attractive rain barrel will capture and store water for future dry periods.¹

2. Locate a place in your yard or garden in which to collect rain to temporarily store or allow rainwater infiltration. Yes, this may be called a “rain garden,” but as mentioned earlier, your entire property is a rain garden, so you might consider this area to be an intermittent, shallow pond. These don’t have to be very deep and are usually only excavated to about 12 inches. Just like a rain barrel, these depressions will fill quickly with any sizable rain event, so make sure you allow excess to escape and flow along the terrain’s natural drainage pattern. The plant materials used to landscape your rain garden must be able to tolerate extreme swings in soil moisture. Fortunately, there are several from which to choose. Here’s a great website that may help you plan and choose the right plants for your situation:
www.raingardensfornashville.com/rain-garden-templates.html.
3. Lastly, try to limit the amount of impervious surfaces on your property. If you live in an established home with the traditional hardscape features (driveways, patios and walks), this may be less practical (but *not* impossible!). However, if your home is under construction, making more sustainable hardscape decisions will not only help replenish the water table, but it may also greatly increase the vitality and health of any existing large trees in the area by providing critical oxygen and water exchange in the soil.

Crushed stone, pea gravel and unit pavers are some of the most common paving materials that will help promote water infiltration. Some lesser-known products include pervious concrete and asphalt. To prevent uneven settling, a qualified contractor must install either of these.

5. Lessen the Lawn

When it comes to landscape and garden design, there will always be differing opinions on which imposes the most maintenance: turfgrass or planted beds. My personal opinion is that a perfect, weed-free monoculture of lawn is much more labor intensive than a well-thought-out collection of plant material. America’s love affair with year-round rich, green turf must be rethought if we are to evolve into a more ecologically sensitive society.

As was mentioned earlier regarding the “bull’s-eye” approach to landscape design, consider having smaller areas of high-quality turf nearer your home for play and recreation. If your property is fairly large (more than 1 acre), reconsider how much you are mowing. If your neighborhood allows (another topic in itself), have three zones of maintenance: well-kept and more frequently mown turf nearer the home; a band of semi-annual mowing or bush-hogging beyond the first zone to keep unwanted invasive woody plants, such as privet and honeysuckle, at bay; and a third zone, possibly entitled “nature’s helper” (not to be confused with the soil amendment of the same name), surrounding your perimeter, in which you do nothing at all. This approach not only requires less maintenance, but it is also far more animal and bird friendly.



The traditional expansive lawn on the left requires enormous amounts of energy and resources. Consider taking some large tracts of turf out of your maintenance regime by being creative with bed sizes and layouts.¹

6. Eat Your Yard

So, how much holly, laurel or juniper have you recently eaten? How about blueberries, peaches, apples or figs? Our properties and gardens all comprise a limited amount of area. What we do in this space is ultimately our decision. Not so long ago, we anticipated the winter arrival of seed catalogs or we eagerly made the trip to a *real* garden center to see what they had in the way of fruit trees. But, these days it seems that the plantings in our yards have become “for show only.” Considering that the very first gardens were surrounded by walls and contained only plants used for consumption and healing, our perception of plants has devolved to a point where only one of our senses is engaged. If it looks pretty, we can accept it. If not, there is no place for it.



Blueberries are delicious to eat, plus they provide beautiful fall color. Consider how edible a plant is the next time you prepare to bring one home from the garden center.¹

In his book *Professional Planting Design*, author Scott Scarfone gives detailed instructions for the creation of “mixed planting beds” (plant compositions composed of greater diversity with trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants and ground covers). Taking that a step further and selecting plants that not only have a variety of seasonal interest but also provide food for man or critter only makes sense. Intermixing some basil, mint or other herbs with some “traditional” plants blurs the boundaries between the edible garden and that which is for show. And when did we become so fearful of fruit or nut trees?

You may still resist planting tomatoes or okra alongside your boxwoods and azaleas, but at the very least, consider feeding the nonhuman visitors to your property when selecting a new tree or shrub. In his book *Bringing Nature Home*, Douglas W. Tallamy shares a list of the plants that most benefit wildlife. The number-one plant for feeding the most variety of species in the Mid Atlantic area is *Quercus* (the oaks), with white oak (*Q. alba*) being one of the top choices. It feeds 534 butterfly and moth species, yet it is nearly impossible to find at your “big box” garden centers. Cheap, common and plentiful seem to be the goals of whoever does their plant buying. Aim to be different. Don’t follow the crowd.

Technology and innovation have become routine in our daily lives. Infinite information may be gathered instantly with the click of a mouse or a tap on a screen. When they were first introduced, the very coolest cell phones were called “smartphones.” Today, it is assumed that your phone is of the “smart” variety. When we begin to change our mindsets about what constitutes an acceptable landscape or yard and sustainable ecological principles are standard practice, perhaps then our collection of “smart yards” will unite in helping us tread lightly and leave our grandchildren with a living legacy.

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1. Photo by Garry Menendez.
2. Photo by Sam Rodgers.

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