

Landscape designers add low maintenance to their ideal garden

Specialist says feed the soil, not grass

By Leslie Anderson
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LAWRENCE – A strip of asphalt next to the Essex Art Center seemed like the last place where one could plant a garden.

"It was just a big dead alley," ecological designer Terry Bastian recalled. "It was hot and uninviting. It was filled with trash that blew in."

This spring, however, volunteers under Bastian's guidance have been working to transform the 27-by-130-foot slope off Island Street into an oasis for birds, butterflies, and humans thirsting for an escape from urban blight.

Once established, it should also be a low-maintenance garden that requires little watering – and no pesticides.

Instead of a thirsty lawn, the slope will be planted with hardy vines, ferns, and prairie-type wildflowers that can reseed themselves from year to year. Water runoff from the art center's roof eventually will be collected in rain barrels, where either goldfish or an environmentally friendly bacteria known as "dunks" can keep mosquitoes from breeding.

"Part of water conservation is to use the water that you have," Bastian explained as he strolled the crushed-stone paths that now wind down the hill. "A good element of garden design is to create a wildlife habitat as well as aesthetics for human beings."

Whether he is planning a low-maintenance garden in Lawrence or advising golf course crews in Newton, Bastian is part of a new generation of landscape designers who care about ecology as much as appearance.

The two are not mutually exclusive, he insists.

Bastian was hired by Groundwork Lawrence, a community-based environmental organization, to suggest ways to create and improve the city's open spaces without burdening citizens with high-maintenance landscapes that die with the first drought. Yet his methods can also aid the suburban homeowner who doesn't want to spend all summer with a garden hose in hand.

"It's easy to get a garden to look good if you have a gardener come every day," said Bastian, whose company, Waterflowers Ecological Design, is based in North Reading. "But when people think about water conservation, they don't realize how an ecological and sustainable landscape can be so much more rewarding."

Nor does that mean entirely giving up that birthright of every American homeowner – the lawn. While Bastian advocates planting more low-maintenance alternatives, such as Boston ivy and periwinkle, he acknowledges society's desire for grass.

"People love lawns. It's the best thing to play soccer on. If you have kids, it makes a play area."

Pesticides and herbicides do not a lawn make, however. Bastian said he is overseeing several demonstrations of organic care of soccer fields and is advising managers at several Newton golf courses on how to reduce their use of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and water.

"The secret is to do less," Bastian said. "Instead of feeding the grass plant, you feed the soil. A good healthy soil results in the need for 60 percent less nitrates, and you're building a healthier soil ecosystem."

Bastian advises planting a variety of grass seed – perhaps a mix of fescues and an endophyte-enhanced tri-rye – and see which kind establishes itself. With the soil enriched by compost, he maintains, pesticides and herbicides are unnecessary.

"A chemical program kills most of the beneficial bacteria and fungi. That leads to disease and a weakened grass plant, which attracts pests," he explained. "The analogy is trying to feed someone doughnuts and coffee. You'll be green, but you won't be healthy."

To keep weeds at bay once the lawn is established, Bastian recommends using a product consisting of corn and soy gluten that prevents weed seeds from germinating.

While most of Bastian's clients are golf course and park managers who are seeking environmentally friendlier techniques, he is also working with the nonprofit Ground-

Saving our water



GLOBE PHOTO / DAVID KAMERMAN

Volunteer Deborah D'Onofrio of North Andover helps prepare an alley in Lawrence for its transformation into an urban garden.

work Lawrence on projects ranging from playgrounds, community gardens and the Essex Art Center's alley to open-space improvements along the Merrimack River.

At Summer and Newbury streets, for example, a vacant lot is being transformed into a neighborhood park with a play structure, benches, and plantings. The park was designed in neighborhood meetings, and residents will be involved in maintaining their new garden.

"We tried to give a palette of materials to the community that we thought would make the site interesting, that were hardy, that would be easy to maintain," said Marianne Paley, program manager for Groundwork Lawrence.

"We know that there are not resources to mow a lawn or to plant something that takes a tremendous amount of care. We want it to be a place that will attract people, where kids will play and that will look bet-

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ter in five years than the day we put it in," she said.

Wood chips will cover the play area. A few apple or poplar trees might provide

shade. Instead of a traditional lawn, Bastian said, the new soil will be planted with fescues and clover.

"Once it's established, it won't receive water at all," Bastian said. "The focus is finding those native plants that are just tough, tough, and yet have their beauty."

With its new landscaping plan, the alley next to the Essex Art Center will become an outdoor classroom and performance center. The alley also provides handicapped access to the rear of the art center, so the plan is to create a "sensory garden" for people with disabilities by offering rich scents, textures, and the sounds of insects and birds.

"The main focus is to create an oasis," Bastian said. "In the sunnier areas, we'll use a wildflower mix, so we'll have native flowers that will reseed themselves. That will always be a little Monet painting."