



*Beauty*

# WITH A PURPOSE

How to realize your backyard dreams while helping the planet

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Photos courtesy Melanie Rekola



The word 'sustainability' is being used a lot these days, but what exactly does it mean? And how does it apply to your backyard?

In environmental terms, sustainability implies an action can be continued indefinitely with limited or manageable impact on the environment. From solar power to heat your pool to a composting toilet for your cabana, there are many options available for people interested in responsible landscape alternatives. With a little thought and planning, these simple, sustainable choices can create a stunning landscape while still having a positive impact on the planet and lessening your environmental footprint.

#### PATIOS AND DECKING

The patio and/or deck is a key factor in a beautiful and functional landscape. Thankfully, there are several eco-friendly material options on the market.

##### *Natural stone*

There are seemingly endless natural stone options for your steps, patio or decorative purposes. When sourcing natural stone, it is important to ask your supplier or contractor where the material comes from. Many less expensive varieties of stone are imported from China or India. Instead, try to choose stone quarried within close proximity. This will not only reduce carbon contribution caused by long-distance freighting and transport, you can also be more assured that the labour used to collect the stone was of fair value.

Drought-tolerant perennials are both thrifty and low-maintenance.

##### *Man-made stone products*

When choosing interlocking patio stones, look for permeable patio pavers. These products look the same as traditional interlocking stones, but also allow moisture to permeate through its joints. Non-permeable pavers completely seal off the underlying soil, which, in urban areas, can contribute to 'urban heat island' effect, a phenomenon in which metropolitan areas become significantly warmer than surrounding rural regions. A non-permeable surface also sends more water into over-taxed storm drains, kills any organisms living beneath the stones and doesn't allow water to percolate to nearby plant life.

##### *Composite wood*

For decking, arbour or pergola purposes, composite wood products are an excellent alternative to traditional lumber. These materials, which require little or no maintenance, are typically made from a combination of grocery bags and recycled/recovered wood waste that would otherwise be burned or thrown into landfill. Although composite wood itself is not easily recyclable, it is extremely long-lasting and allows for better use of the limited and valuable natural wood supply. By opting for composite materials, fewer trees are used, allowing the remaining ones to naturally reduce greenhouse gases by removing carbon from the air.



Trees effectively draw excess carbon from the air and provide habitat for local wildlife. With proper placement, they can also reduce the heating and cooling needs of your home.

#### SUSTAINABLE GARDENS

There are many simple gardening techniques that can actually aid the environment, rather than just minimize harm. As is so often the case with Earth-friendly options, you need to be prepared to spend more money up front. Fortunately, this investment will likely save money in the future. Another added benefit is that several of these options require less maintenance, which leaves you more time to enjoy your own personal outdoor oasis.







Living walls have many positive ecological attributes, such as decreasing storm water runoff and reducing 'urban heat island effect.'

## PLANT SELECTION

### DROUGHT-TOLERANT AND NATIVE PLANTS

When choosing plant material for a sustainable garden, it's important to select varieties well-suited to the area in which they will be planted. For example, most pool and patio areas are hot and sunny, requiring drought-tolerant plants that thrive in full sun. Planting a range of native plant life is also important, as variety helps support fragile local ecosystems. Indigenous plants are strong and genetically adapted for survival. The Internet, as well as your local nursery, are both great resources to help you choose beautiful native plants specifically suited to your area.

### FOOD FOR POLLINATORS

Another essential layer of an eco-friendly garden is the inclusion of plant material designed to provide food for pollinators (e.g. bees, wasps and other insects, as well as certain species of birds). Without these hard-working creatures, much of our local produce would disappear. Annuals bloom profusely, but perennials, flowering shrubs and trees tend to be better alternatives, as they require less watering and care and won't have to be replaced year after year. When planned properly, a garden can have a succession of blooms for the majority of spring through fall. Consult a professional landscaper for more help in formulating a garden plan.

### TRENDY EDIBLES

While providing food for the pollinators, you can also provide food for yourself. There are so many opportunities, even in a residential landscape, for edible plants. You can choose a sunny, discreen corner for a modest vegetable garden or even plant groupings within ornamental flowerbeds. If you have a passion for cooking, there are many beautiful and tasty herbs available for backyard planting. Also consider fruiting trees and vines, which can be both attractive and practical, providing profuse blooms in addition to tasty fruit.



A modest garden, containing a selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, can be a rewarding addition to even the smallest backyard.

### TREES

Supporting urban forestry is a necessary layer in every sustainable landscape. Trees remain one of the cheapest, most effective means of drawing excess carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) from the atmosphere. One mature tree can absorb 22 kg (48 lbs) of carbon dioxide per year. When placed properly, trees can also minimize heating and cooling costs and provide habitat for local wildlife. Though many homeowners worry about invasive and destructive tree roots, these problems can also be avoided with proper placement. For those with limited space, there is a wide range of smaller ornamental species, making tree planting an option for almost any homeowner.

### LIVING WALLS AND VINES

Installing a 'living wall' comprised of tough, drought-tolerant perennials makes a bold and beautiful green statement. These 'structures' take up very little room and have many positive ecological attributes, such as decreasing storm water runoff and reducing urban heat island effect. When installed on an exterior wall, living walls can even better insulate the building envelope, reducing the need for interior cooling.

You can also green your vertical space by planting vines. Most are vigorous growers and ideal to sprawl across long expanses of fencing or exterior walls, or drape over pergolas and arbours.





Choosing stone from a nearby quarry instead of from overseas is an eco-responsible alternative.

## CARE AND MAINTENANCE

### SOIL AND MULCH

For plant material to survive well without chemical fertilizers, you need to start from the ground up. Depending on the condition of the existing soil, you can help your garden thrive by blending soil with simple compost, triple-mix or manure. Mulch is equally important, as it helps retard weed growth and retains moisture by protecting the soil surface from the sun. In addition, the bottom layer of mulch is constantly decomposing and feeding plants, reducing the need for any supplemental fertilization. It does require a top-dressing every year or two; when newly spread, it makes the garden look fresh and tidy.

Use shredded wood mulch and if using the coloured variety, make sure the related dye is non-toxic. Pressure treated wood is often used in 'recycled' mulch. Pressure treat does contain arsenic, but much of its toxicity leaches out long before it is recycled. While mulch knits together after watering and rarely blows out, for applications in close proximity to a pool, filter cloth and river stone on the soil surface are a safer option.

### WATERING

When planned thoughtfully, sustainable gardens need very little (if any) additional watering after they are established. When they do need a drink, a simple rain barrel attached to an evestrough should suffice. For larger areas, a soaker hose is best, as it limits the amount of water lost to evaporation. A lower-maintenance option is a rainwater harvesting system, which collects water in cisterns and makes responsible residential irrigation a reality.

### FERTILIZATION AND PEST CONTROL

Adding natural bone and blood meal to each planting hole is a reliable way to promote vegetation growth. *Mycorrhizal*, a beneficial fungus can also be added to help roots draw bone and blood meal from the soil, along with other nutrients they would not be able to access otherwise. By using these techniques, plant life will grow strong and become more naturally resistant to most garden pests. Despite your best efforts, infestations can still occur. Here are a few eco-friendly remedies you can use to combat these crawling creatures.

- **Aphids:** Fill a spray bottle with water, a small amount of biodegradable dish soap and a few drops of olive oil. Spray carefully on infected plants daily until the problem disappears. Do not over-spray, as this solution can kill beneficial insects, too.
- **Ants:** Common baking soda is toxic to ants, but kind to the environment. Simply sprinkle some in problem areas.
- **Slugs and snails:** To prevent these pesky creatures from leaving holes on your foliage, leave a few plates of beer around your garden as bait, in which the pests will happily drown themselves.



Sustainable practices ensure that the Earth's resources will be available for future generations to enjoy—and that there will be a healthy planet on which to enjoy them.

### PLANTERS

Many shrubs, perennials and small trees are well suited to planters. Drought-tolerant varieties, such as ornamental grasses, work best. Be sure to select planters capable of enduring winter temperatures in your area and choose plants that withstand planting zones two to three levels colder than your region. In areas with sub-zero temperatures, protect potted plants by heeling them into the soil, covering them with leaves or mulch or moving them into a cold garage after freeze-up. This will ensure their survival for years to come.

### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

As you begin your journey into sustainable gardening, you must remember to adjust your expectations. The 'perfect garden,' in which each leaf and flower is flawlessly intact, is simply not possible; nature, after all, is far from perfect. Those occasional blemishes will have a very minimal impact on the overall effect of any landscape and your reward will be a safe and healthy garden; and a clean conscience as well.

By maximizing the planting potential of your property—and leaving no wasted space—you can help pave the way to a greener future. As population levels continue to rise, urban vegetation is becoming more and more crucial. The health of the environment is closely linked to the health of society in general and sustainable practices ensure that the Earth's resources will be available for future generations to enjoy—and that there will be a healthy planet on which to enjoy them. ➔

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