



Keeping Your Greens “Green” How to Have an Environmentally-Friendly Yard

By Ryan G. Van Cleave



As more and more American companies are “going green” and making environmentally-motivated choices versus financial bottom-line choices, it’s time for the rest of us to consider how we can be a little more green in our own lives. (If we need a little motivation beyond the countless green references in fashion, news, politics, and sports, we’ve also got the Planet Green TV network for 24-hour support.) An easy place for homeowners to start going green is to reconsider their own landscaping and home beautification options.

Even when choosing to make environmentally sound landscape choices, though, some people still make mistakes. A common misconception is that installing a green landscape is a one-and-done deal. John Lay, the General Manager of the installation division of Artistree Landscape Maintenance & Design, a 200+ person company based in Venice, warns that “lack of maintenance is a real issue. When you put in landscaping, it’s no different than owning a new car. The yard needs attention. It needs care. It needs a cutting back here and there. It needs to be fed properly. People often forget the long-term care a yard requires.”

Why put that type of time, energy, and money into a yard? Well-managed, it enhances the beauty and value of both a home and a community. It’s a great place to entertain. And for some, the outdoors becomes a wonderful private sanctuary to get away from the world. “Figuring out ways to come up with better outdoor living space is a popular idea,” says John Lay. “It’s an opportunity to spend more time with family, or just by yourself. It’s low cost, and the landscaping itself provides an

outstanding return on your investment.”

If making a commitment to a greener yard appeals to you, the following eight ideas are easy ways to reduce your environmental footprint, save time and money on maintenance, and have a overall healthier (not to mention greener, in every respect of the word) yard.

1. Use Native Plants. John Lay recommends, “Get native Florida plants versus straight commercialized ones. They’re usually no more expensive, and the benefits are significant.” He explains that native plants need less water, less fertilizer, less pruning, and have better long-term growth. They also help give a sense of local color to a yard.

2. Use Recycled Materials. In many areas, mulch is free from the local public works department—you can also make your own easily enough by putting organic coffee grounds, straw, sawdust, vegetables, and yard clippings into a compost pile. Another fine option is to use recycled bricks from old buildings or construction sites. They’re cheaper than new materials, and you can feel good that your bricks aren’t being transported a long distance to get to you (wasting fuel, time, and materials).

3. Irrigate Properly. With so many parts of the country in drought conditions, this is especially important. Coupled with drought-resistant plants, drip irrigation (vs. spraying, which results in a lot of evaporation and wasted water) means you might only have to provide deep watering twice a month.

4. Get A Rain Barrel. For \$100-\$300, you can buy a good-sized rain barrel and attach it to your downspout to collect rainwater. Dr. Esen Momol, the statewide coordinator of the Florida-Friendly Landscaping Program at the University of Florida, says, “Floridians need to be aware that water supply shortages and pollution are everyone’s problem. We all need to preserve Florida’s fragile environment and water resources.” A rain barrel is a very inexpensive way to address these issues and have clean water at the ready for any of your yard needs.

5. Plant Trees. Not only will your yard look nice, but the shade comes with a financial incentive, too. Buildings

shaded by trees can cut heating and cooling costs by as much as 25%. Thirty trees can absorb the full annual production of the average person. Trees also filter water and soil, and fight erosion. Plant a few extra trees and reap the rewards while adding beauty to your landscape.

6. Fertilize Properly. Fertilizer is not a “miracle cure.” Putting on too much—a common problem—allows it to seep into aquifers and cause water pollution. Carefully follow the fertilizer’s directions, and consider slow-release fertilizers that feed plants over a long period—they’re more cost-effective and are usually more environment-friendly than standard fertilizers.

7. Encourage Wildlife. A birdbath, bat house, or brush pile will prove tempting for all manner of wildlife. Offer food, water, and cover, and animals will be there to stay. Even if these animals didn’t provide benefits (bats eat mosquitoes, butterflies pollinate plants, and having birds in your backyard is a great face-to-face lesson in nature for children), it’s environmentally sound to help out some of those animals whose habitats are threatened by human growth and urban sprawl.

8. Avoid Herbicides. Instead of using harsh chemicals that are dangerous to plants, animals, and people, try a lemon juice and vinegar spray on unwanted plants. Or consider using live mulch (rye or thyme), making your yard look terrific while functioning as a natural herbicide.

Whether you’re going to do it yourself or hire a professional landscaping company, make sure that your decisions are based on green principles such as those listed at the Florida-Friendly Landscape Program website (floridayards.org) or on the Environmental Protection Agency’s website (epa.gov/greenkit/index.htm). Ask questions, consider your options, and make choices that are right for you, your yard, and the environment. Whether you’re out to save a few hundred dollars a year or simply want to be a better steward of our planet’s finite resources, a greener view of landscaping can go a long way towards making a real difference in our environment and quality of life. 🌱

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