

Adapting Old Gardens for New Times

When an older landscape no longer works well, there are many options to consider instead of starting completely over. Water conservation, drought tolerance, storm water management, tree canopy cover, edible plants, and supporting pollinator insects are becoming increasingly important issues, along with keeping our gardens beautiful and manageable over time.

Thoughts on succession and sustainability

All landscapes are in a continual process of change. We can work in step with that process, taking an approach of incremental changes and rather than a complete "do-over" or "quick fix". This approach is more about cultivating a strong garden ecology and less about using products. Keeping the best of the existing landscape with its established root systems and beneficial organisms and making adjustments for better appearance and function. Here are some practical ways to help old landscapes to function like new - only better!

1. Judicious editing.

- Remove the worse, keep the best, and add adapted plants to fill the gaps.
- Recycle appropriate plants by transplanting them to more suitable locations.

2. Use low impact cultivation to preserve soil ecology and conserve water.

- Use surface applications of compost and mulch as site prep to preserve roots and soil organisms.
- Use mulch that is coarse and chunky in texture to help capture and retain moisture. Wood chips, compost-wood chip blends, and composted leaves are some good choices.
- For heavily compacted soil, cultivate just enough to break soil up into large, loose clumps, and then add a thin layer of compost followed by coarse mulch.
- Use surface installed irrigation emitter tubing rather than trenching for underground irrigation.
- Add new plants in the fall to better establishment with less irrigation demands the first years.
- The above methods are also important for protecting tree roots while making garden changes.

3. Gardening around mature trees and preserving valuable canopy cover.

- Most mature trees do not tolerate significant changes to their root zone.
- Use low-impact methods to preserve soil conditions and roots.
- Prune in moderation and garden for existing shade conditions.
- Consult an ISA Certified Arborist® early in planning stages for tree protection options and methods.

4. Replace or renew? Renovation pruning options.

- Some old shrubs respond well to dormant season renovation pruning; do it in stages over a season or two for optimal results.
- Restoration and renovation pruning are sustainable options to refreshing the landscape while conserving the costs of plant installation and irrigation for a totally new landscape.

5. Plant selection, renovation, and replacement considerations.

- Choose plants that are adapted to existing cultural and site conditions.
- Choose plants that give a lot and demand little.
- Get to know and use a broader range of native plant species and cultivars.
- Be aware of native plant pathology issues, they are not all pest free.
- Choose plants that will fit the space. Be wary of the suggestion that a plant is “easy to prune”.
- Prune for natural growth habit so you can prune less often.

6. Sustainable cultivation practices for water quality and conservation.

- Cultivate a lean but healthy garden by using modest rates of nutrient and water applications..
- Maintain modest soil organic matter: replenish when compost and mulch have had time to decompose and diminish. Excessive compost use can become “too much of a good thing” and lead to problems.
- Water deeply and infrequently for increased rooting depth and better drought tolerance.
- Add plants to maximize canopy cover (even at ground level) to intercept rainfall and slow run-off.
- Use coarse-textured mulch to reduce soil compaction and erosion, and to improve water infiltration.
- Add rain gardens and swales to help replenish the soil water reservoir and reduce run-off.

7. Including Edibles?

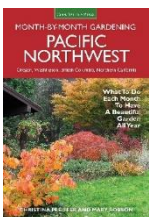
- Herbs, greens, vines, berries, and dwarf fruit trees can be incorporated to create an edible landscape.
- Large containers can be assembled for seasonal color and food value by adding leafy greens.
- Be prepared for the specific pruning and cultivation requirements of food plants.

8. Pollinator friendly destinations.

- Every small garden that is host to pollinator insects and other wildlife can make a significant contribution to overall habitat availability and species survival.
- Grow a diverse selection of flowering plants and include local native species.
- Keep routine applications of insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides out.
- Allow some areas to be less tidy and leave some spots of bare soil for ground nesting pollinators.

9. Lawns

- Right plant, right place - grow it where it will thrive, replace it with something else where it won't.
- Adapt to a different aesthetic: convert to a grass/broadleaf blend, or over-seed with one of the new micro-clovers. Before herbicides, clover wasn't a weed but a functional component of good turf.
- Practice “grass-cycling,” allowing confetti fine grass clippings to fall into the turf. With good mulch-mowing techniques, you can maintain a dense lawn with less demand for weeding, fertilizing, watering, and thatching, plus you won't have to haul the clippings around.



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