

Eco-Friendly Landscaping



The Jonah Center for Earth and Art

What Is Eco-Friendly Landscaping?

Lawn-care and gardening practices that are chemical-free, uses native plants suitable to our climate and soil conditions, requires minimal watering, and slows storm water run-off all contribute to the health of our ecosystem. These practices take into consideration the value of all the plants and animals that live around us — including those we don't see. What you do in your own backyard has an impact on the quality and health of nearby streams, the Connecticut River, and Long Island Sound. It can also affect your health.

Here are some basic eco-friendly landscaping and lawn care practices that you can easily implement

Slow Down Storm Runoff

Our homes are built with gutters, downspouts, sump pumps, paved driveways, and storm sewers for obvious reasons: to keep water out of our homes and to prevent our yards from turning into muddy bogs during the rainy season. But slowing down storm run-off is important to prevent erosion, allow water to percolate down into the soil where it will be available during dry spells, and to prevent chemicals and oil from streets from ending up in streams.

Storm run-off can be slowed by having gutters empty into rain barrels, creating small water retention areas where amphibians and wetland grasses can live, and creating buffer zones

between lawns and streams. (see the link to the *Backyard Water Resources Guide* on the Eco-Friendly Living page of The Jonah Center website www.thejonahcenter.org)

Avoid Chemical Fertilizers, Pesticides, and Herbicides

Most of the chemicals applied to lawns end up in nearby streams and rivers where they are wasted, harm water quality, and damage aquatic life. Remember that pesticides and herbicides are poisons, and they are dangerous to humans, pets, and wildlife. Children put their faces close to the ground. Dogs lick their paws. Birds can mistake the chemical pellets for food. These poisons kill the underground organisms that are necessary for truly healthy soil. Using chemicals on your lawn makes your lawn more dependent on them, and it can promote rapid growth at the expense of plant health. Dense turf grasses require heavy watering, which washes more the chemicals away.

When you stop using chemicals, there may be a transition time when your lawn looks less healthy. But good things are going on underground as soil health is re-established and plants focus their energies on growing vigorous roots. Eventually, your yard will be lush and beautiful and you will have the peace of mind of knowing that you are not sacrificing your health and the environment for the elusive “weedless” lawn.

More information on eco-friendly lawn care is available from the Connecticut Chapter of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association by calling (203) 888-5146 or visiting their website www.ctnofa.org

Test Your Soil

Find out what nutrients or amendments your soil needs before you apply anything. Soil test kits are available by calling UConn’s Soil Testing Laboratory at (860) 486-4274 or visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu where all sorts of information is easy-to-find.

Aerate Your Soil

Hard, compacted soil prevents water and nutrients from getting to the roots of your lawn vegetation. Every few years, it helps to have someone run a device over your lawn that forms little holes.

Remove Dandelions Before They Blossom

If dandelions bother you, buy a simple device that can pull out their root system before they blossom in the spring and spread more seeds around.

Fertilize With Compost

Compost is the best source of nutrients and beneficial organisms. Spring or late summer is the best time to apply it. You can collect your vegetable food scraps in a kitchen container, and then transfer them to an inexpensive compost barrel. Mix them with some leaves and/or grass

clippings, and within a few months you will have a very rich, black soil to spread on your lawn or gardens.

Allow Native Plants and Groundcovers to Spread In Your Lawn

Not all grasses and groundcover plants want to grow in the same soil. If you notice that moss or a particular groundcover plant wants to spread in your lawn, let it happen.

Reduce the size of the lawn you have to mow by installing native perennial and shrub gardens. Choose plants and grasses that are suited to the levels of rainfall, temperature, and sunlight of the area.

The Jonah Center installed a two-part eco-friendly garden demonstration at Russell Library, corner of Broad and Court Streets in Middletown, CT., with the support of a grant from the New England Grassroots Environment Fund. This project includes a wide variety of shrubs, perennials, and groundcover plants suitable for our climate.

A list of local, organic land care professionals qualified to recommend plants for your property can be found at www.ctnofa.org

Encourage Shade Trees

Shade trees not only provide habitat for birds, but they make houses and yards cooler, reducing the temptation to install or turn on air conditioning. Air conditioning is not only expensive to run, but when summer electricity is in high demand, the dirtiest power plants are also turned on, just when air quality is the worst already.

Don't cut down shade trees. Use the leaves for composting or let the city pick them up for community composting. Instead of using a power leaf blower that consumes fossil fuels (either in the form of electricity or gas) rake them by hand as a form of exercise.

Reduce Lawn Mower Emissions

If possible, use a manual push mower. But if you need a power mower, keep it in good running order by changing the oil and air filter frequently. A well-maintained engine will not wear out and start emitting more fumes. New lawnmowers run cleaner. You won't have to breathe those nasty fumes yourself either.