

The New American Garden Design – by Mark Gilliland

Just about everything we know or touch in our daily lives is being transformed by macro forces such as globalization, the Internet, global warming, mass extinctions, water shortages and peak oil. Is it any wonder, then, that our approach to gardening and landscape design would also be undergoing rapid metamorphosis?

The foundation of this new gardening approach can be stated in one word: **sustainability**. The trend is away from highly manicured formal English or Italianesque planting designs, away from carefully managed perennial borders, away from exotic (and often invasive) plant materials requiring extensive irrigation, pest control, fertilization and maintenance. Rather, the focus of the new plant palette becomes “care free” native species and related cultivars.

The benefit of native plant use includes inherent support of native fauna, especially insect populations. Recent findings have demonstrated conclusively that to ensure a healthy population of song birds, for instance, a robust “ladder” of microbes and native insects must be available in the local food chain. Native insects typically require native vegetation for feeding and egg laying.

The roots of the New American Garden trend can clearly be seen in the work of A.E. Bye whose designs of the 1950’s thru 1980’s were ground-breaking in use of native materials based upon an aesthetic of extreme naturalism. In some instances, crews would cut entire soil beds from the surrounding forest, transplanting them like sod into the designed landscape to ensure a totally seamless native plant understory.

The movement “back to sustainability” has gained adherents over the last decade in Europe and the American Southwest, where the focus has been on low maintenance, drought tolerant plant materials. The palette of plants include those which have been ignored or under-utilized by previous generations of garden designers, including grasses, succulents, spring ephemerals, wildflowers and native (endemic) species.

The heart of landscape design is the goal of organizing outdoor space to ensure beauty, interest and utility. We want to create places of sanctuary and repose, a compelling environment at once natural and manmade, functional and aesthetically pleasing.

Don’t worry! Native plants and their hybrid cultivars come in all shapes and sizes. Mixing native plant materials based upon bloom and foliage colors, size, shape and texture creates a sense of rhythm and surprise. By selecting plants that have exciting fruit, twig shape or bark, the garden landscape can be appealing through all four seasons as well as provide important habitat.

As the emphasis is now on environmental awareness, garden designs aim for low maintenance, minimal application of chemicals - preferring an organic approach utilizing compost and natural controls - and responsible water (re)use including rain gardens, rain barrels, riparian (stream side) buffer areas and other forms of stormwater management.

Plant materials are chosen based upon knowledge of how plants grow together in the wild, achieving a synthetic ecosystem which supports a healthy mix of native birds, butterflies & insects and micro-fauna.

Sustainable Design Guidelines

- Preserve and create wildlife habitat (via vegetative buffers, woodlands and a mixed palette of native plant species.)
- Preserve, re-use, slow down, filter and infiltrate stormwater (minimizes irrigation and erosion) through natural and man-made methods:
 - rain barrels
 - rain gardens
 - riparian (streamside) vegetative buffer zones
 - meadows, wetlands and vernal ponds
 - trees and woodlands
 - groundcovers and mulch
- Limit disturbance of the native landscape in new construction and maintain tree canopy.
- Restore disturbed soil micro-systems with organics (such as compost.)
- Leave unmodified (or create new) buffer zones and connecting corridors to ensure wildlife habitat and diversity.
- Habitat-based plant selection (the right plant for the right place based upon micro-climate & environment.)
- Community-based plant composition (emulate natural environment.)
- Remove invasives and weeds (allowing native plantings to take hold.)
- Expand your palette (one gardener's weed is another's native specimen.)
- Avoid fertilization, pesticides and intensive water requirements.
- Let gardens evolve naturally over time.

Rather than trying to control every aspect of the landscape through labor intensive effort, relax and form a dynamic partnership with nature - allow unexpected surprises! Embrace change. Don't expect every year to be a repeat of the previous. Let the plants decide themselves where to re-seed, which micro-environment best suits them (e.g.: a perennial gradually shifting position in the bed over several seasons.) Encourage volunteers and native re-growth. Transplant and divide when necessary. Selectively cull seedlings to maximize ecological diversity while eliminating weeds & invasives. Ultimately, the goal is to watch and learn from our plant teachers.