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Sustainable Landscaping

FOR
DUMMIES®

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- Cut back on water usage
- Control lawn and garden pests naturally
- Opt for sustainable decks, patios, fences, and more

Owen E. Dell

Licensed landscape architect and contractor



Sustainable Landscaping FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Owen E. Dell



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About the Author

Owen Dell got his first serious exposure to landscaping in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where he spent his childhood afternoons gamboling about instead of doing his homework. After a brief career in electronics, which taught him where his affections really lay, he turned to horticulture. Two charismatic college botany professors opened his eyes to the wonders of nature. Class field trips made it clear that the gap between the way nature handled landscaping and the way people did was huge — and that it was the people who needed help.

In 1971, Owen went on to start his own landscaping business, which was devoted to developing native-plant gardens for California homeowners. After a brief period of hauling rubbish and landscaping mobile homes, he found a niche for himself. As his career developed, his vision expanded, aided by a series of natural disasters that illuminated the need to make landscaping smarter, safer, and more environmentally friendly. Wildfires led Owen to become an expert in firescaping (a term he coined). Droughts taught him the value of water conservation. The impacts of fossil-fuel use led him to found the Fossil-Free Landscaping Group. Each catastrophe led to a wider vision of what landscaping could and should be.

Today, Owen is an internationally recognized and widely admired expert in sustainable landscaping. He has written numerous articles for *Sunset Magazine*, *National Gardening Magazine*, *Southern California Gardener*, *Pacific Horticulture*, and many others. He's an international speaker who has presented hundreds of truly rousing lectures, classes, and workshops to homeowners and professionals. Owen is also the co-writer and co-host of the popular Santa Barbara, California, television series *Garden Wise Guys* (www.citytv18.com), a sustainable-landscaping sitcom. His other book, *How to Start a Home-Based Landscaping Business* (Globe Pequot), has helped thousands of budding professionals get a healthy start on their careers.

Owen's work has been featured on HGTV, Peak Moment Television, and NBC and in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune* magazine, *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and many other publications. He has won numerous awards for his work.

In his spare time, Owen putters in his own garden, hangs out with his cats, spends quality time in wild places, cooks a mean meal from homegrown produce, and dabbles in political and social activism.

Visit Owen's Web site at www.owendell.com.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to those who strive to make the world a better place by starting in their own backyards. What you do matters very much.

Acknowledgments

Let me tell you about my neighbor. I don't want to assume he's eager to see his name in a book, so I'll call him Jack. He's lived in his house for nearly 40 years. He has the same furniture as when he moved in. The same Harvest Gold appliances. The same dial phone. The same 1967 car. And yes, the same landscaping. Far as I can tell, Jack buys food and occasionally some clothing. He's not poor; he just likes to live simply. When I think about how much stuff I've gone through in that time, I'm truly humbled. True, his stuff is not environmentally cool. His car pollutes more than my Prius, and his appliances don't have Energy Star labels. But when you look at the overall impact of our lives, I bet his footprint is way smaller than mine. Jack is the most sustainable person I know, but he doesn't see himself that way. He's my hero, but he doesn't know it. He's just a guy living his life, but he has inspired me to do better, and that inspiration led, in part, to this book. Thanks, Jack, for keeping me honest. You're the best neighbor a person could have.

Many people have helped me become (I hope) worthy of the task of spreading the word about sustainable landscaping. Lacking the space to name them all, I tip my hat to those who have devoted their careers to this worthy work and who have inspired me and taught me so much. My esteemed colleagues — Ken Foster, Misty Gonzales, Billy Goodnick, Alison Jordan, Mark Wisniewski, and many others — provided feedback, information, resources, and encouragement while this book came into being. My staff was consistently supportive as I neglected them to find time to write. Kudos to Bonnie Barabas for keeping the office in one piece and to Octavio Toscano for keeping things together out in the field. Your good work ensured that I have a business to go back to now that the writing is done.

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The staff of the *For Dummies* series was a delight to work with. More than that, they consistently encouraged me not to hold anything back, to create a first-class book filled with substance and solid information. Thanks, Alissa Schwipps and Mike Baker of Wiley. You guys ain't half bad. And I'm grateful to the illustrators, Kathryn Born and Stacey Isaac, for their lovely contributions to the book. What a team!

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Introduction

It's a lovely fall day. I'm looking out the French doors that separate my office from the food forest outside. I see lemons, oranges, and tangerines ripening on (what an amazing coincidence!) my lemon, orange, and tangerine trees. A tall stalk of amaranth, a welcome volunteer, is topped by an outrageous pompom of red flowers swaying in the gentle afternoon breeze. Leeks, onions, fava beans, several kinds of basil, sage, bell peppers, hot chilies, blueberries, and a couple dozen other edibles are within my view. There's even a water chestnut plant growing happily in a tiny water garden.

All in all I have more than 130 kinds of edible plants in my very compact yard, along with four water features; what must be hundreds of kinds of ornamental plants; lots of beneficial insects, butterflies, and hummingbirds; and a couple of cats snoozing in the shade on my little meadow of native sedges. I have half a dozen inviting outdoor rooms for entertaining and quiet contemplation, plus a welcoming entry area, a street-side native garden, and plenty of intimate views and surprises. I feel so fortunate to be able to enjoy this place every day.

I guess you could say I'm in love with my garden. I'd do just about anything for it, but the truth is that I hardly work on it at all. A couple of hours of work a week is sufficient to keep it in beautiful condition. It requires very little water, almost no fertilizer, and never, ever any pesticides. It generates almost no waste or bad karma. It feeds me, shelters me, entertains me and the others who experience it, delights all my senses, and provides habitat for many wild things — and it does all this with very little negative impact on the environment. It's an efficient living system that really works.

This amazing spot didn't happen by chance, of course. I spent 28 years creating a sustainable, beautiful garden. And landscaping is my profession, so I do have a leg up on the ordinary Joe. But having spent my adult life creating similar gardens for thousands of clients, I know such a place is within your reach — and you don't have to wait a quarter century to have it.

This book shows you how to develop your property for maximum enjoyment, at minimal cost, and with a net positive impact on your surroundings. That outcome may sound like magic, but then, gardens are full of magic. You just have to know the tricks of the trade, and that's what *Sustainable Landscaping For Dummies* is all about.

About This Book

You may have already struggled and felt overwhelmed with the complexities of creating a landscape, especially if you yearn for something that's good for the environment as well as for you. Admittedly, landscaping is complex — a lot more complex than most people realize. Yet when taken step by step, creating a sustainable landscape isn't difficult. This book does a thorough job of filling you in on the principles of sustainable landscaping and on the all-important details that make the difference between a garden that's just okay and one that will blow everybody away with its beauty and usefulness.

Now, I happen to believe that anything worth doing is worth having fun with. Gardens should be fun, and so should reading about them. You can expect to find some silliness here, the occasional bad pun, and a light touch. But the fun doesn't come at the expense of substance. You'll find all you need to know here — perhaps more than has ever been compiled in one place on this subject. This book isn't fluffy. But I like to believe it isn't tedious, either.

Like all *For Dummies* books, you can dip into the book anywhere to get what you need. You don't need to start at the beginning unless you want to. Go for what attracts you, and move around as you want. You'll always get what you need, quickly and easily (the table of contents and index can help). When I just don't have the space to cover everything, I refer you to handy Web sites or to some of the other gardening and landscaping books in the *For Dummies* series. I don't want to leave you hanging.

Conventions Used in This Book

The following conventions are used throughout the text to make things consistent and easy to understand:

- ✓ New terms appear in *italics* and are closely followed by an easy-to-understand definition.
- ✓ **Bold** highlights the key words in bulleted lists and the action parts of numbered steps.
- ✓ All Web addresses appear in `monofont`.

One thing you should know is that I use the terms *landscape* and *garden* interchangeably. It's easy to argue about semantics, but for most people, the space around their home is their garden or their landscaping. To some degree, the term you prefer to use depends on how you manage things, with *garden* having a more active flavor than *landscape*. But hey, there's really

little or no difference, and frankly, I figure that reading the words *landscape* and *landscaping* over and over would be a little irritating after a while.

What You're Not to Read

Every now and then, a special situation comes up in this book: I tell you something that's interesting but not necessarily important to everyone. For instance, the fine details of how to make a handsome retaining wall out of chewed-up dog toys are quite fascinating. But surprisingly, most people probably don't care much about this matter, despite the fact that our very way of life is dependent on it. Unfortunately, I think the dog-toy info ended up on the cutting room floor. But those are the type of fun but unnecessary facts that are placed in *sidebars*, which are boxes with gray backgrounds to separate them from the regular text. I don't take points off for skipping these, and hey, don't mind my feelings. I'll be okay. Really.

Foolish Assumptions

I've been thinking about you. I think I may have your number when it comes to your gardening interests. See whether I'm right:

- ✔ You own a single-family home or hope to. It has some land around it, a little or a lot, and you're wondering what the heck to do with it. You're intrigued by the idea of messing around with land but don't have a lot of background in gardening or landscaping.
- ✔ You care a lot about the environment, and you realize that this is your chance to do something really good — or to really mess things up. You realize that your yard is part of the real world and that what you do there isn't just about your needs and your family's needs. You take your responsibilities seriously.
- ✔ You like tackling do-it-yourself projects, not just to save money but because they're fun. You're no all-star landscaper, but you can dig a hole without ending up in traction, and you like physical work.
- ✔ You may have some gardening experience, but you're facing a project that's bigger than anything you've tackled before. You're maybe just a teeny bit intimidated. You need a friend in the business.
- ✔ Then again, you may be a pro — a landscape contractor, gardener, or builder who's looking for cutting-edge information on sustainable landscaping. You've come to the right place! Pull up a wheelbarrow and have a seat.

How This Book Is Organized

Each part of this book covers a particular major chunk of information. Take a minute to look them over before you dive into the wonderful world of sustainable landscaping.

Part I: Sustainable Landscaping: The Basics

That word *sustainable* is everywhere these days. It has a warm-'n'-fuzzy feeling, but you may not really understand what it means when applied to landscaping. Part I is the place to find out. It helps you understand what makes a landscape sustainable, what a sustainable landscape looks like, why it matters, and what it's going to cost you. It also introduces you to the sustainable materials, practices, and principles that go into a landscape system. Finally, Part I helps you decide what you can do yourself and when to call a pro.

Part II: Good Design: The Key to Sustainable Landscaping

Part II gives you in-depth details on designing a landscape. You discover *site analysis* (a fancy term for looking at stuff with your brain in gear); screening for sustainable features; and basic principles of landscape design, including some of the tricks the pros use to create those killer gardens in the fancy magazines. This part provides information on how to handle special situations and how to stay safe and out of trouble. It also provides you with plenty of information on creating a great landscape plan.

Part III: Water, Water, Everywhere: Water-Conserving Irrigation and Drainage

Most landscapes require some kind of watering system, if only to get new plantings established. Even native plantings need a little water at times. A watering system can be as simple as a hose or as complex as a fully automated irrigation system with a smart controller that gets its programming from outer space (no kidding). Here's where you find out how it all works. In Part III, you see how to manage watering for maximum conservation and how to maintain your irrigation system. You also get up to speed on the all-important, ultra-sustainable topic of water harvesting. Finally, I provide a bit of info about drainage systems. Wear your swim fins while reading this part.

Part IV: Hardscaping Made Easy: Creating Awesome Features without Wrecking the Environment

Even though sustainable landscapes rely primarily on plants and other elements of the biological world, you inevitably need some of the hard stuff: concrete patios, stone retaining walls, fences, arbors, steps, and lighting systems. Here, you find out how to assemble sustainable hardscape elements into outdoor rooms to serve your family's needs as well as how to construct and maintain them. Just to show you that I'm not all business, this part also addresses fun stuff, such as art, water features, outdoor kitchens, and facilities for animals — all done with minimal nasty impacts.

Part V: Great Greenery for a Green Garden

When most people hear the word *landscaping* or *garden*, they think of plants. Plants are the heart of the garden, and with the underpinnings out of the way, the fun of populating your property with trees, shrubs, perennials, and other plants begins in this part. Here you see how to design gorgeous plantings that also really work, demanding little care and few resources. You get the dirt on soil, composting, and mulching. You find out how to buy, install, and care for plants. And of course, you read all about lawns — but not just any old lawns; you find out about alternatives to conventional lawns and lawn care.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

Mere mortals with nongreen thumbs will love the list of ten easy, quick, and inexpensive (or free) projects that can almost instantly hurtle your existing landscaping into the world of sustainability. And everyone should have a look at the ten big mistakes to avoid.

Don't stop there! If you have special interests or needs — such as making your home safer in a wildfire, developing an edible landscape, or making the most of rainfall — check out the appendix, which includes detailed drawings of realistic projects you can create. You also find sections on attracting wildlife to your property, developing a drought-tolerant landscape, and creating a landscape that saves energy by keeping your house cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

Icons Used in This Book

To make this book easier to read and simpler to use, I include some icons that can help you find and fathom key ideas and information.



I know a few landscaping pointers, and I'm not holding any of them back. Paragraphs with this icon next to them are places to get the inside scoop on doing things right.



Some stuff is more important than other stuff. This icon signals you to listen up, because if you blow this topic, you'll regret it. So don't skip any paragraphs marked with this icon.



Sustainable landscaping isn't for sissies. You can get smacked down in lots of ways. Heed the warnings, and nobody gets hurt.

Where to Go from Here

Many sustainable processes don't just make things less bad; they make them a lot better than how they started out. If you really take this advice far enough, your landscaping will go beyond sustainability to become a net producer of great stuff — food, fresh air, cooler homes, more wildlife, happier people, and more.

And now you're on your way. Maybe you feel like you're stepping off the plane in an exotic foreign land: a bit excited and a bit disoriented. If you're the linear type, like me, just keep reading. I think it's important to at least absorb the basic principles in Chapters 1 and 2. But you may have a particularly urgent need, such as getting an existing irrigation system back on its feet (Chapter 10), building a sustainable water feature (Chapter 13), or growing more food on your land (Chapter 18 and the appendix). Go for it.

To make navigation as easy as possible, the table of contents comes in two flavors: Contents at a Glance, which covers the major headings, and a full Table of Contents that spreads everything out. Don't forget the yellow Cheat Sheet in the front of the book and the appendix in the back, which provide some neat special projects. Something for everybody — that's my philosophy.

All kidding aside, I consider it an honor to share my lifetime of experience in — and passion for — sustainable landscaping with you. I wish you the most fun ever in making your dreams come true. Best of luck!

Part I

Sustainable Landscaping: The Basics

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Of course, when we landscape the place, we'll get rid of that old washing machine and replace it with one that's indigenous to these parts."

In this part . . .

What the heck is a sustainable landscape, anyway? What does it look like, and what makes it tick? You may wonder how to get one (and how much it will cost). If you're unfamiliar with this kind of landscape, you may also wonder whether it really makes any difference to the environment or to you. Finally, you may not know whether you can create a sustainable landscape yourself or have to hire a professional.

Start with this part to make sense of all these concerns and more. It's a great jumping-off point for the rest of the book, because it gives you the core ideas behind sustainable landscaping. It's kind of like a road map for what's to come. You'll feel a lot better after you read these chapters.

Chapter 1

Landscaping the Sustainable Way

In This Chapter

- ▶ Going through a sustainability overview
 - ▶ Creating a sustainable landscape
 - ▶ Good design: The key to success
 - ▶ Working out your plan
 - ▶ Making maintenance easy and safe
-

Look at nature. Nobody gardens nature. Nature quietly thrives, while down in town, everyone takes up arms every Saturday morning — hacking, decapitating, shearing, poisoning, ripping, and tearing their yards, not to mention sweating and swearing. Lucky for you, this book is all about how to develop your landscaping along natural models so you can enjoy lovely, environmentally friendly surroundings and get a break from the battle.

This chapter gives you an overview of what sustainable landscaping is, why it matters, how it works, and how you can transform your property into a beautiful, functional sustainable landscape. If you start with this chapter, you'll have a good grasp of the basics, and then you can move on to whatever sections of the book apply to your current situation or whatever you're curious about.

Getting Up to Speed on Sustainability

At one time, all gardens were simple. They were made up of plants, soil, and natural building materials. They didn't cost much to create or care for. Their effect on the environment was positive, because they didn't cause strip mining, release poisons into the atmosphere, or consume huge quantities of fossil fuel. They were sustainable before the word was popular because they could go on essentially forever.

That's what sustainability is all about. Gardens can be that way again. All over the world, people are getting wise to the fact that they have an alternative to the dysfunctional industrial/commercial landscaping model that's been jammed down our throats by advertising and ignorance.



Sustainability is a better way. It's not perfect, but by doing things right, you'll make a huge and important difference. Your land is your opportunity to help create a better future.

What the heck is sustainable landscaping, anyway?

Sustainable landscaping isn't about a look. A Japanese garden can be sustainable. So can an English garden or a desert garden or a woodland garden. A sustainable landscape can be formal or informal, geometric or naturalistic, simple or complex. Other than planting vast swards of mowed lawn in a dry climate, you're pretty much free to choose whatever look you want as long as you follow the principles of sustainability, setting up a smoothly functioning ecosystem that makes minimal demands and creates minimal problems.

The key ideas that make sustainable landscaping work are simple and easy to put into practice:

- ✓ **Living system:** Nature is a system of interrelated subsystems that work together to form a smoothly operating whole — a living, functioning ecosystem. There are many examples of living systems, such as your body (made up of various organs), a forest (filled with many kinds of plants and animals), and the ocean (teeming with millions of interdependent life forms). If you make your landscape a highly functioning system patterned after the ways of nature, it will operate like nature — without the need for much control or intervention and without harming any other living system.
- ✓ **Homeostasis:** *Homeostasis* is a fancy word for *stability*. It's the balance of forces in a living system, with no force getting out of control to cause harm. Consider your body, which more or less functions automatically. You don't need to will your heart to beat or your eyes to see; those things just happen. With a little care from you, all is groovy. The landscape system can work this way, too, if you set it up right.
- ✓ **Deep design:** Homeostasis doesn't happen by accident; it's a product of good design. I'm not talking about the too-common superficial design that creates pretty but dysfunctional gardens. Instead, I mean design that looks beneath appearances to develop a beautiful landscape that also really works. Deep design takes special skills — skills that you discover in this book.

- ✓ **Cyclical design:** Nature recycles everything. As the Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh once said, “When I look at a rose I see compost; when I look at compost I see a rose.” Conventional manmade systems are linear. Consider the process:
 1. Get a virgin material from nature (usually with disastrous effects at the source).
 2. Use toxic and energy-intensive processes to alter it so much that it can never go back to nature.
 3. Use it one time.
 4. When the material’s too-short useful life comes to an end, dispose of it in a landfill, where it plugs up the works of yet another formerly living system.

Nature has been very patient with us, but this linear game is just about up. Mother Nature hates it, and besides, she’s running out of merchandise. Going back to the infinite and ancient cyclical way of life makes your garden one with nature, less troublesome, and more enduring.

- ✓ **Harmony with the local environment:** There are no nonlocal conditions. Your property is unique, with a particular soil type, microclimate, exposure, vegetation, and other factors. By choosing plants and other elements that are well suited to these particulars, you set up a robust ecosystem that will be happy with its lot in life. (Conventional gardens rely on ill-adapted plants and other elements and then depend on continual input of resources to keep from failing.)
- ✓ **Careful management of inputs and outputs:** The sustainable landscape thrives on what nature offers. It makes efficient use of resources such as building materials, water, and fertilizer. What goes in and out of the landscape is minimized, so as many effects as possible are beneficial.
- ✓ **Consideration of on-site effects:** What happens on-site is carefully considered at the design stage. Natural features such as soil, native plants, and animal habitat are preserved. All improvements must meet the test of being good players. Each element of the newly formed ecosystem must play a beneficial role: making oxygen, sequestering carbon, providing food, improving the climate inside dwellings, preventing erosion, or protecting against wildfire, to name a few. To minimize negative effects, toxic materials aren’t used; neither are energy-intensive processes, noise-generating machinery, or thirsty plantings.
- ✓ **Consideration of off-site effects:** What happens off-site is important too. By that, I mean that there should be no damage at the source of materials. Your landscape won’t be truly sustainable unless it leaves forests intact, mountains unmined, oil unburned, and workers safe and happy.

- ✔ **Benefits beyond sustainability:** Finally, a sustainable landscape should seek to go beyond mere sustainability. As visionary architect William McDonough observed, we shouldn't just be less bad; we should be good. Landscapes offer so many benefits to users and to nature that it's easy to use the power of the sun, the rain, and the soil to create a paradise for all living beings. You can do that — and you have no reason not to.

Why sustainable landscaping matters to the environment

Where do I start? The traditional landscape is an environmental train wreck:

- ✔ It fragments and destroys native habitat.
- ✔ It consumes natural resources.
- ✔ It causes strip mining, clear cutting of forests, and other negative effects at the source of materials.
- ✔ It introduces nonnative plants that invade and devastate wild ecosystems.
- ✔ It wrecks waterways and groundwater through the leaching of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. (Of the nitrogen applied to lawns, 40 percent to 60 percent ends up in the water.)
- ✔ It increases runoff, which results in urban flooding and further damage to waterways.
- ✔ It fills canyons and landfills with waste.
- ✔ It increases global warming through the use of fossil fuels.
- ✔ It wastes precious water to keep useless ornamental plants and lawns alive.
- ✔ Outdoor power equipment creates noise in every neighborhood.
- ✔ Pesticides kill 60 million to 70 million birds each year, not to mention their negative effects on beneficial insects and other wildlife.
- ✔ Pesticide use in the United States is ten times greater for landscaping than for agriculture.

Cowabunga! What a mess! Added to these effects are those on human well-being:

- ✔ The health of one in every seven people is affected by pesticides.
- ✔ Air pollution caused by pesticides and fossil-fuel use damages everyone's health.
- ✔ Each year, 60,000 to 70,000 severe accidents and fatalities are caused just from lawn mowing.



This has got to stop. Sustainable landscaping addresses all these issues by cleaning up the system, making these effects unnecessary, and respecting the environment. Simply put, sustainable landscaping is good for the environment because it does things the right way.

What's in it for you

Suppose that you don't even care about the environment. Fine. You still should have a sustainable landscape because it's cheaper, easier to care for, more satisfying to live with, and much more interesting.

You'll save money because all your inputs are significantly reduced. You'll spend less on materials, water, fertilizer, gasoline, labor, dump fees — the works. Sustainable landscaping is a penny-pincher's delight.

Because sustainable landscaping makes so few demands on you, you spend less time keeping it from falling apart and more time enjoying it (or enjoying something else you love). If you've busted your chops on a conventional landscape for a while, you know how much work it can be. Imagine that work not happening. That's what converting to a sustainable landscape can do for you.

Finally, when you see how beautifully everything works, you'll come to admire the elegance of a finely tuned system. It's soothing to know that things are working smoothly without much help from you.

Doing Your Part: What It Takes to Make a Sustainable Landscape

I assume that you'll be fairly involved with your project, even if you hire someone to do some of the work. That's why you bought this book, right? Well, here's an overview of what it takes to make your landscape sustainable, including tips on how to make the most of your relationship to the job.

Taking the time to do things right

Slow down. Whether your project is small or massive, the practice of deep design (refer to "What the heck is sustainable landscaping, anyway?" earlier in this chapter) demands careful observation and attention to detail. I've been told that in ancient times, Japanese garden designers sat on the site every day, all day, for a year, carefully noticing the way the sun moved; how the trees responded to wind; what animals visited; and many more subtleties that can

be grasped only through quiet, intense scrutiny. As the seasons changed, the designers learned in summer what they could never learn in spring, and so on through the full annual cycle. Only after that apprenticeship did they dare to begin the design process. Whether you opt to follow the ancient ways or not, do give yourself time to understand what you're working with. Attention to detail pays off in many ways.

Using your skills to lower your bills

If you're planning to do the work of building a whole new landscape, you can look forward to a lot of physical effort. Even a smaller project can be hard work. Landscaping isn't crocheting doilies. On the other hand, it can be a wonderful opportunity to get outside and get some exercise, and it can be a lot of fun too.

Busting some sustainability myths

As with anything new, concerns come up. You'll be making a big, expensive, long-term commitment to your landscaping, and you need to know that this isn't some goofy New Age idea that doesn't really deliver the goods. Here are some facts to set your mind at ease:

✓ **Myth:** Sustainable landscapes are ugly.

Truth: Plants in a sustainable landscape are healthy and vigorous, and have room to grow into their beautiful natural forms. Structures are made from natural materials, with their inherent beauty showing through. Sustainable landscapes are green, flowery, fresh, and lovely — not parched gravel beds with thorny, nasty-looking plants (unless that's what you want, of course).

✓ **Myth:** Sustainable landscapes are expensive.

✓ **Truth:** All landscaping is expensive, but sustainable landscaping is less expensive for a couple of reasons:

✓ Because the sustainable approach emphasizes plants over hardscape, you save money on the installation. Plants are cheaper than concrete.

✓ Even more important, the ongoing care of the landscape will be much less because it is undemanding of resources and labor.

✓ **Myth:** Sustainable landscapes don't work.

Truth: The whole point of developing a landscape sustainably is to create an ecosystem that functions smoothly without much effort on your part. When you look at what's needed to keep a conventional landscape in one piece — the mowing, watering, pest control, pruning, and all the rest — you see that *conventional* landscaping is what doesn't work.

First, take stock of your ability to dig ditches, lift heavy stuff, and generally grunt out (weekend after weekend for a really big project). Balance that effort against the cost of paying someone else to do some or all of the work. If you do want to tackle it, be sure you know how to work safely, and check with your doctor if you have any qualms about your fitness level. Stay safe, okay?



Doing the work yourself can save up to half the total cost of the project. But before you leap in, it's helpful to assess your abilities. You may know how to run a tractor or sweat copper pipe or program an irrigation controller. But you can also get into things you don't know how to handle. This book, and its companion volume *Landscaping For Dummies* (by Phillip Giroux, Bob Beckstrom, Lance Walheim, and The Editors of the National Gardening Association), will help you to develop skills you may not have. If there's some part of the project that you can't or don't want to tackle, hire an expert. Paying someone else to do the work is cheaper than having to do it over. See Chapter 3 for some guidelines on when to do it yourself and when to hire a professional.

Getting a grip on costs

You have lots of variables to consider, and costs vary wildly depending on the kinds of improvements you'll be making. A flagstone patio can cost 20 or 30 times what a ground cover would for the same area, for example, and generally speaking, landscaping an entire yard front and rear can set you back the price of a new car or two. But many smaller projects and improvements won't break the bank.



No matter the size of your project, you can save tons of money by doing the work yourself and by tapping the waste stream for materials whenever you can. See Chapter 2 for some inspiring waste stream resources.

Developing a good tight budget is difficult when you aren't sure what you'll be doing, so develop your design first. Then do your homework. Talk to contractors, shop for materials, and also consider the value of your own time. Don't get too detailed at this stage. When you know exactly what you'll be doing, you can crunch the numbers to determine the total expense and adjust your plan as needed.

If you'll be doing an entire property, this number will be big. If the number is too big, consider how you could lower costs without compromising quality (smaller plants, less hardscape, and a manual irrigation system, for example).

Or break the project into phases spread out over a few months or even years. For instance, you may tackle just the front yard during the first phase, and then follow up later with paths, patios, lighting, and other features. You have lots of options that help keep the money end of things on track.



Keep track of expenses with a spreadsheet. Log all the elements of the project and what they cost: the tractor used for demolition, tree trimming, topsoil, irrigation equipment, contracted labor (which may be the whole job), incidental expenses like a portable toilet for the workers, and so on. The handy thing about having costs set up this way is that you can keep updating your costs as your design goes through its inevitable changes. You can also use it to track actual costs as the project progresses. Check out Chapter 3 for more help keeping cost in mind.

Scheduling your project

Consider the scope of the work and how much time it will take you to do it or have it done. It's amazing what you can accomplish in a weekend or two, if you've planned things out thoroughly in advance. Not every sustainable landscaping project has to take months out of your life. Looking at the sidebar on the sequence of landscaping operations, you'll see a lot of tasks. Evaluate how many of those tasks are part of your project. A smaller job may involve only a little demolition, some planting, and a layer of mulch. A full-yard remodel could require work in every category and therefore call for some serious advance choreography.

Whatever the scope of your project, keep in mind that many landscaping tasks are dependent on the time of year. If you'll be getting professional help with some or all of the job, talk to your contractor about the timing from his or her perspective. Think about your cash flow, too, if that's a consideration.



For a large project, develop a project calendar, using the sequencing information in the sidebar. Schedules can get off track, of course, but at least you'll have an action plan to work from.

Planning and Design: The Keys to a Sustainable Landscape

When it comes to making your landscaping work properly, good design is everything; it determines once and for all how the system will work. Design is especially important when you have big plans in mind. It's detailed, but it's a lot of fun too.