

The Palmetto

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Designing the Natural Garden

By Richard Devine

Natural landscaping is as much a concept as it is a step-by-step process. Conceptually, it involves the use of trees and large masses of evergreens, multi-season grasses, and perennials in bold sweeps of color and texture. They are combined in a step-by-step process in a functional and aesthetic manner to provide beauty and interest through all four seasons. The plants chosen have low maintenance requirements and are allowed to grow to their natural form and height.

Once you're convinced of the benefits to be derived from a natural landscape around o your home, both to you and the wildlife that depend on it, the next step is to plan it.

The easiest method would be to let it go its own direction. And, although there is an intrinsic beauty to the natural world, there is also a degree of randomness. While we accept and expect that in wild areas, allowing our residential lots to develop without any control is unacceptable to most of us (and to most landscape codes). Also the soil has usually been so altered in the development process that many undesirable and opportunistic plants would take over. And few people would want to wait for natural succession to take place.

What we can do, however, is learn from nature, mimic or enhance its best qualities and mute its negative ones, while retaining its overall character and function.

As with any other project, the best results come from a carefully thought out

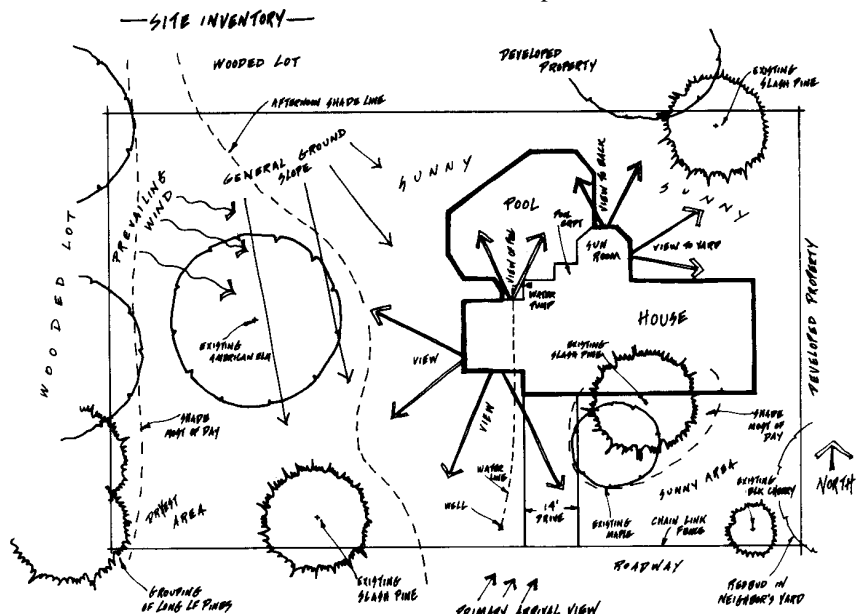
plan. The design process can be separated into several logical steps: Preplanning, Site Inventory, Site Analysis, Special Requirements, and the Design itself.

Preplanning Considerations

Before any actual design work takes place, think about how the site will

function - how it will be used by both humans and wildlife. The needs of both must be taken into account and compromises made so both benefit from the results.

For humans, some important questions could be: Who is going to use the landscape and in what kind of activities



will they be engaged? Will there be entertaining, swimming, playing games, or cooking? Are areas of parking necessary, and will there be walkways, terraces, or patios? Is lighting going to be necessary? Are there going to be service and support areas, such as vegetable gardens, a greenhouse or nursery, or facilities for storage and trash? If children are part of the family, will they require special play areas? Utilities, water supply, septic tank location, electric service, and fire protection also are important considerations and influence the final design.

If the landscape is also to function as a habitat for a wide diversity of creatures that formerly had free rein over the countryside, then food, water, shelter, and nesting areas for wildlife should be built into the design. Find out what kinds of creatures are native to the area and in what type of environments they live. Do they use burrows or do they live in trees? Do they need tall grass or are they happy with shrub thickets? What kinds of plants are they associated with? How much space do they need?

This holistic approach to landscaping leads quite naturally to the use of native plants as well as functionally similar non-natives, and results in long-term benefits for all that use the property. We derive an inner peace by bringing nature into our lives; we experience the beauty of the changing seasons and help support

species diversity. On the more practical side, we lower our maintenance costs and contribute to conservation. The plants that are installed in naturalistic landscapes require little or no additional water and fertilizer. Pesticide use can be almost eliminated. And - contrary to common belief - natural landscapes deter, rather than attract, pests and diseases.

Site Inventory

After giving considerable thought to how the the property will be used, a thorough and objective inventory of the property should be carried out. The site inventory generally consists of the foundation, vegetation, and topographic surveys. To best visualize the property as a unit, each can be drawn on a separate overlay.

The foundation survey includes the house, garage, sheds, and other buildings, as well as fences, sidewalks, driveways, septic tank, and well. The vegetation survey shows the location of all important plants as they now exist on the site. Be as thorough as possible. First, show all canopy trees, then understory, then shrubs and finally grasses, perennials, and annuals. Ideally, this should be done over an entire year, so that plants that haven't come up yet, or are inconspicuous during one season, are identified when they are present. It can be very helpful for later design work to separate the evergreens

from the deciduous plants.

Finally, the topographic survey shows the changing elevations over the entire property. It can be as detailed As you want: a highly accurate analysis accomplished with the use of a transit, or a general layout showing high and low points of the property. The idea is to get a feel for property contours that will be helpful when the site analysis is done.

Site Analysis

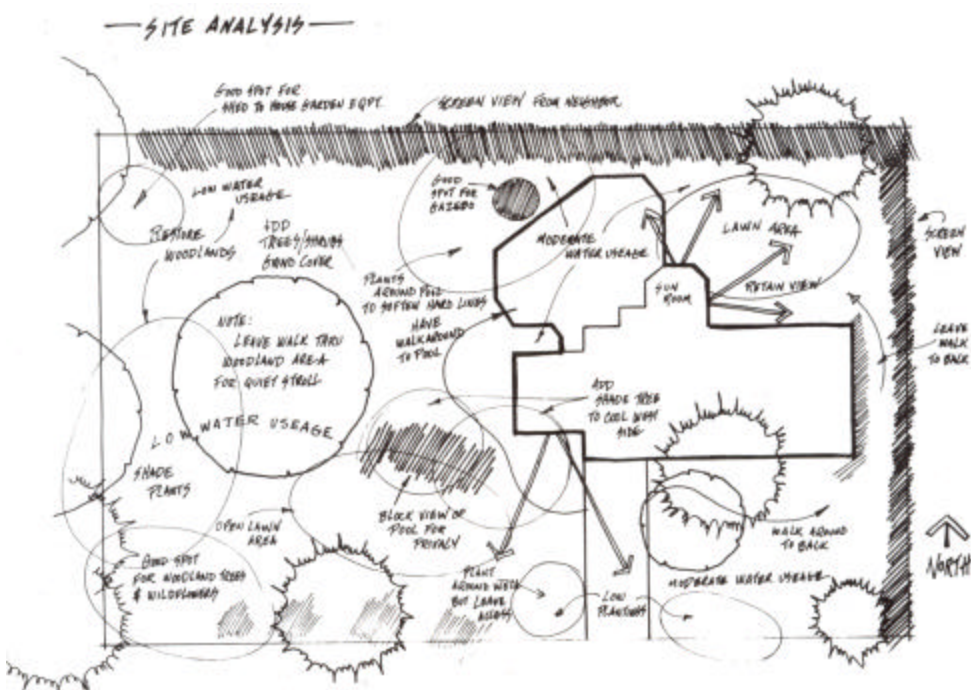
The site analysis is the interpretation of the surveys taken in the inventory. It's a good idea to plot this information on a separate overlay. In it, you can locate the best views, mark areas you want to keep as is, and identify plants of special interest. Prevailing wind direction can be noted, as well as the passage of the sun across the property. Notation of shade and sunny areas can be made for later location of plants. Topographic data and soil analyses, as well as a walk through at various times of the day and year can help to delineate the xeric, mesic, and hydric areas, tell you whether the soil in various areas is acidic or basic, and whether it's organic or sandy. Preparing a good site analysis will help you take full advantage of the site's potential while impacting minimum damage.

Special Requirements

By becoming familiar with the layout of the property, the site itself sometimes suggests a design direction. Maybe a particular theme becomes apparent. Maybe you want a butterfly garden, a wet garden, or a pool. Maybe you want to attract hummingbirds or other birds. Maybe you have a rather xeric site, and would like to grow scrub plants. This is a good time to refer to checklists of the animals and plants native to the area.

The Design: Putting it all down on paper

Having armed yourself with a list of objectives and your special needs and requirements, and knowing fairly completely what's growing on the property and the animals that call it home, you're ready to prepare the landscape drawings.



principles and they were located to take optimum advantage of their characteristics, irrigation should be minimal. Native plants should only require irrigation to get them established; then they should be able to do well with only natural rainfall. Some areas may need temporary sprinkler systems that can be later removed, or require only hand-watering until establishment. Only those areas of higher maintenance will require permanent irrigation equipment.

Natural landscaping can be a highly rewarding and exciting experience. And most of all, it provides a satisfaction that we have worked with nature and not tried to conquer it. We have recognized and acknowledged our basic ties.

Richard Devine is a landscape gardener / horticulturist for an estate in northcentral Florida. His article on native plants for birds appeared in the August issue of American Horticulturist.



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