



How Green Gets Done

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The business and practice of sustainability

What Happened to Sustainability?

By Carol Becker

We're all talking about sustainability in one way or another these days. Unlike the "old days," just after the millennium, MELA is no longer the only Chicago-based organization in the green industry concerned about sustainability, and this is good. Conversation about an important new trend on the horizon is the beginning of change. Yet I wonder "what happened to sustainability?" Is it a lot of talk and no real action?"

Consider this: In 2010, ILCA had seven applications for sustainability awards. In 2011, applications were down to three, and no one was surprised. "Lack of projects" kept submissions down," says ILCA Executive Director Scott Grams. The reason: not enough demand from homeowners, who tend to be "late adopters" of new trends. In addition, with the existing economy, our members say that most customers press for the lowest possible cost, and customer perception remains that sustainable projects are more costly. Plus, chemical-free landscape care is dead last on their list. Some report that only five percent of homeowners ask for it specifically. For most, results and service come first.

Some MELA members tell me that our own industry is the obstacle to change. Stories of contractors who refuse to bid on innovative sustain-

able projects make me wince. So it's not only lack of demand from the customer that's holding back a wider use of sustainable practices. MELA's pledge is to bring you innovative ideas for *selling* sustainability as well as information about *how to practice* it. Here are some members ideas:

Cathy Bilow, Kid Conscious Lawn Care, says: "We integrate sustainable practices into our maintenance without the client ever knowing it's called sustainability."

Tom Lupfer advises: "Come up with a detailed procedure that is repeatable so you can propose a sustainable landscape over and over again, to every customer." He also builds something – usually an edible garden – into every plan, "to get customers involved in the space."

Jack Pizzo and others routinely show not only installation costs, but the costs of maintenance over three to five years, so the customer sees the overall savings of sustainable landscaping. This technique also begins to educate the customer about sustainability depending on the whole system.

Jim Patchett, Conservation Design Forum agrees. Strategies to change our industry will be "*designing whole systems*, with integrated planning, design, stewardship and management," with the three most

important things for sustainability being "education, education, education."

This seems like extra duty for us now, but in the end education is all about growth and increased sales. Those who practice sustainability will stand out with special skills once the industry opens up. Plus legislation and EPA regulations that seem way down the pipeline will soon make significant impacts on how we do business to manage water, soil and chemicals. It's time now to get beyond talking and make a commitment to sustainability so we're ready for the changes ahead.

Turn the page to read more in this issue, visit our website or call us with questions. MELA is here to help. ■

Carol Becker,
MELA
Executive
Director



After a career in non-profit and business consulting,

Carol obtained her degree in horticulture and now serves as the Executive Director of MELA. She has also published many articles and two books on leadership.

Native Plants – The Real Deal

By Grace Koehler

Sustainability is on everyone's mind these days. It's all the talk! Here's something you can do: Make the commitment to use native plants. We have an incredible opportunity to shape the future of our landscapes, the areas in which we live and work every day, through the use of native plants. If lack of know-how is stopping you, read on. If lack of motivation is stopping you, read on. Here are all the reasons you should care about this important step in "going green."

Eco-Benefits

We have all heard the benefits of using natives, but they're worth repeating. Native plants require less consumption of natural resources such as fuel, water, fertilizer and pesticides. Natives, of course, are generally defined as plants that grew in an area naturally before colonization occurred and foreign plants were introduced by settlers. Natives have evolved and adapted to our local conditions and can withstand the typical heat, cold, drought, pests and diseases of our area. Almost every "foreigner" has an equally beautiful and functional native replacement.

But benefits of native plants go well beyond their ability to tough out our climate. They have a natural symbiotic relationship with our soil, where both components benefit. Midwestern geography has given us the richest soils in the world, but designing our landscapes with alien plants does little to preserve this resource from erosion and total degradation of its physical and biological properties. Deep-rooted native plants work as part of the natural system to maintain balanced biology of the soil, increasing oxygen supply, water retention and microbial activity,

which in turn results in improved performance of the plants themselves. Natives also lessen the load on storm water conveyance systems, with roots that reach sometimes 20 feet below ground level, slowing and retaining water runoff and improving the quality of water that percolates into soil or drains into streams and rivers.

Do the Math

Maybe you've also heard about the lower cost of maintaining a native landscape; if so, you know that this is the way to sell it. Native landscapes do require management, but mowing, fertilizer, pesticide applications and irrigation systems can be totally eliminated from future budgets. Over the long-term, your clients have significant savings, with the advantages of cleaner air and a safer, healthier landscape.

A study by Pizzo & Associates has shown that on a one acre parcel, a native landscape saved up to \$5,000 during the first five years. By year ten, over \$23,000 was saved; and by year 20, savings were a whopping \$68,000! On a five acre parcel

savings are even more dramatic; with the first year at over \$8,000; five years, over \$75,000; and by year 20, over \$460,000 was saved by installing a native landscape system. Arm yourself with similar numbers on your projects, and the savings alone educate your clients. Clients wind up talking themselves into the sale, and then tell their friends how much they saved because they used your services. They'll be knocking down your door for an estimate.

It's the Law

Phosphorus fertilizers are already banned in many states and water runoff is limited in some municipalities,



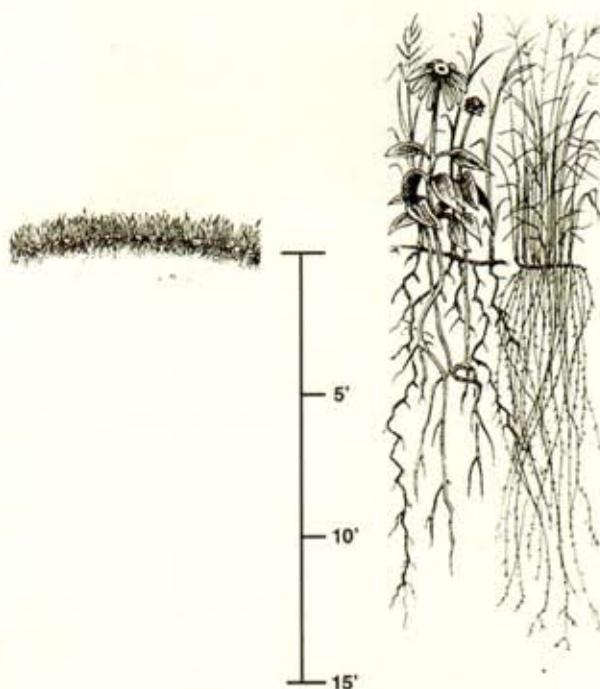
This is a 100% native planting, Amcol International, LEED Silver structure, maintained by Pizzo and Associates.

proof that outside regulation of landscape practices isn't just on the horizon, it's already here. By implementing a proactive approach toward creating sustainable landscapes right now, your business will be poised and ready for future ordinances and policy changes. Plus, by becoming an expert now, you'll be the contractor who gets the jobs once it's mandated.

Here's the evidence that regulations are coming. Since 2006, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) has been conducting studies on our regional water supply. Even though we are located near Lake Michigan, the amount of fresh water is finite. If we don't adopt more sustainable water consumption practices right now, significant shortages will occur by 2050, effecting us, and more so, our children and grandchildren. Our surface and shallow bedrock aquifers in Northeastern Illinois are already showing significant stress. CMAP's plan entitled, "Water 2050" includes ordinances for residential landscapes that in some cases limit turf and impervious surfaces to no more than 40 percent of the landscape. Learn how, change your practices, be ahead of the game and grow your business while others are playing catch-up.

Natural Beauty

There are those who view native landscapes as weed patches. But sustainable is not a design, it's a process. At Pizzo, our belief is that "Good Ecology is Beautiful." Native landscapes designed, installed and maintained correctly are significantly more beautiful and interesting than a yard full of foreigners. Rich with successional color and an array of textures, they invite butterflies, moths and birds to make a home and sustain a balance that allows many species to coexist. They evolve and change with climatic conditions and provide opportunities for education. Mowed lawns, over-mulched meatball shrubs and shaggy alien perennials often are not even recognized as "plants" by many of our indigenous species



Root depth of turf (left) and native plants (right)

of pollinators and wildlife. Besides, let's be honest, they are aesthetically dull.

Change your Business ... and Grow

If it's best practice, more aesthetically pleasing, more ecologically sound, ahead of the regulation curve and more economical for your clients in the long run, why would you not use native plants? I am not suggesting the elimination of lawns and every alien species from the landscape. I am suggesting that you incorporate native communities into every design from now on. Do your homework and start by getting to know 25 native

plants and their cultural requirements! Change practices now, and you'll be the first in line for contracts that require it. MELA's vision is to raise the bar and make this the standard in our industry. What is stopping you now? ■

"Here's my challenge to you: As an active MELA member and sustainable landscape advocate, I challenge you to design at least 25 percent of the total landscape area as a native planting in each plan."

Grace Koehler,
Sales and Marketing Manager
Pizzo Native Plant Nursery



Grace has 20 years of experience in ecological restoration and the wholesale nursery business. She has developed and coordinated production and sales programs for native plants, with expertise in horticultural and native plant communities on the ground level and the roof top. Grace is a past President of MELA and a former Board member.

Dig In

By Marilyn Witney

All the essential activity for living things occurs in the soil, including temperature regulation, oxygen, water, carbon and all the nutrients necessary for growth. Plus, soil is the point of entry into the system of a sustainable landscape.

Traditional blanket applications of fertilizer and chemicals in the spring and fall are not the answer to keeping the soil healthy. It's the easiest way, but not the smartest way to grow your business for the future. Instead, step one is to analyze the site and identify the challenges.

A soil test is first. Make sure that your test will return detailed results, including pH and percent organic matter and nutrient levels. For a listing of various excellent labs, go to the UIUC Extension at <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/soiltest/>.

For example, A&L Great Lakes in Fort Wayne accepts both ag and home samples. Their website contains the required form to submit a sample, along with detailed instructions on how to collect it. According to Agronomist Tim Bailey, test results can be done for eighteen planting options such as Athletic Field, Vegetable Garden, Putting Green or Acid Loving Shrubs, and three of these options can be tested for a nominal fee. Unfortunately, no labs exist yet that return organic or sustainable recommendations. Tom Lupfer, whose landscaping business has a growing sustainable practice, says it's up to the contractor what to use. "But it's not just exchange a bag of chemical fertilizer with a new bag of organic," says Lupfer. "It's a matter of looking at the whole picture."

Lupfer avoids fungicides, pre-emergents and most other chemicals.



He is also extremely mindful of over-irrigation which he says "is one of the most common causes of compacted soil. Saturation sucks the oxygen right out and eventually kills the soil." When test results are in, Lupfer uses both granular organic fertilizer and compost teas with the help of Compost Queen Lynn Bement who is adamant about getting the landscape off a "junk food diet" and "increasing soil biology to enhance plant resistance to pests and disease." Steve Neumann, logic.lawn.care, incorporates soil building programs into his lawn maintenance business. After testing 75 properties, he learned what sustainable practices worked, and what didn't. "In the long run," he says, "it costs less from a business point of view." Lupfer concurs. "The installation looks better and maintenance looks better. Plants don't just survive. They thrive." All of which puts money in your pocket. And helps business grow. ■

Marilyn A. Witney



Editor, "How Green Gets Done"

Marilyn spent over 20 years in advertising at a big agency in downtown

Chicago. She left ten years ago when she discovered plants, and recently earned her BS from UIUC in Horticulture Management. She is a charter MELA member and Chair of the Communications Committee.

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