

# The Landscape Contractor

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## Issue Focus: Sustainability

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# Sustainable Landscape Construction: SITES Springs to Life

*A panel discussion with Tom Lupfer, Roy Diblik and Andrew Clausen*

by Meta Levin

When Tom Lupfer, CLT, of Lupfer Landscaping, first proposed building a sustainable garden as a pilot project of SITES™ (The Sustainable Sites Initiative™), his client, a homeowners association, was gung ho. “Then a new board came in,” he says.

Three hours before the meeting at which Lupfer thought they were signing a contract, he found out the project wasn’t even on the agenda. “They didn’t care about saving the planet. They said another guy could do it for less,” he says. He eventually got the contract signed, but “I had to turn around and sell it as cost efficient. There was an interesting lesson in that.”

Lupfer shared that and other lessons with nearly 100 people during the “Sustainable Landscape Construction: SITES Springs to Life” session at Mid-Am in January. Joined by Roy Diblik, Northwind Perennial Farm, and Andrew Clausen, Lake Street Landscape Supply, he took participants through the genesis of SITES, applying as a pilot site and becoming educated on sustainable practices. “We got good questions,” he says. “Those attending were very knowledgeable.”

The Sustainable Sites Initiative™ (SITES™) is an interdisciplinary effort to create voluntary national guidelines and performance benchmarks for sustainable land design, construction and maintenance practices. Eventually, says Lupfer, there will be no “sustainable” landscaping. Instead, it will become the way things are always done. “It will be just landscape,” he says.



*Tom Lupfer*

Lupfer originally learned about SITES through the Midwest Ecological Landscape Association (MELA) and he now heads ILCA’s Sustainable Landscaping Committee. He credits ILCA Executive Director Scott Grams with encouraging him to apply for one of the SITES pilot projects. Lupfer’s became one of 1,500 accepted from throughout the United States.

The pilot projects are designed to accumulate data that other landscape contractors can then use on their own projects, as well as to establish best management practices (BMP). Some of the latter already are accepted procedures, such as raising mower blades to the right height, says Lupfer. “We are codifying what sustainable landscaping is,” he says. They are, they hope, validating it with solid evidence.

Even though the circumstances delayed implementation of Lupfer’s pilot

project by six to eight months, he has started making small changes on the site. “We’ve started maintenance to heal the landscape,” he says. Construction was to begin in April.

Lupfer’s client for the pilot project is a homeowner’s association with existing buildings. “You run into a whole different set of issues than someone who is working with new construction,” he says. “I had to deal with what I already had on the site.” Other projects in the program encompass a wide range of situations, from parks, trails and campgrounds, to university campuses, streetscapes, government and medical complexes and industrial and office parks. There is even a category for botanical gardens.

Lupfer believes that large housing developments, such as the one used for his project, contain “some of the most abused landscapes out there and some of the largest tracts of property,” he says. “If we can turn these large tracts and help the land, we can get the numbers we need to prove that we are saving money. We need to quantify the savings. That will help sell sustainable landscaping down the road.”

The SITES pilot project contractors regularly meet at online webinars. They go through procedures, ask questions, and are drawing up a list of practices that eventually will be used by those who want SITES certification for their projects. Ultimately, says Lupfer, this will become a part of LEED, the United States Green Building Council’s

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certification program. Like LEED, the SITES rating system will be developed by an open consensus-based approach.

"Finding a willing client is the hardest part," Lupfer says about the pilot project. "You are promoting a project that is outside the conventions of traditional landscaping, and people find comfort in tradition." By the same token, that it is unconventional is one of the reasons why he felt a homeowners association was a good fit. "They take a long-term view of things,"

Lupfer says. He suggests that before approaching a prospective client, the landscape contractor should have studies in hand to show that the upfront costs can be justified by long-term savings.

"I can point out that while you are spending this money in the first five years, you will save this much in the next 10 years," Lupfer says. "Over 20 years, you can save a lot." The processes he used for this project can be applied to any kind of project, from small, existing residential land to huge new developments, he says.

The homeowner's association client allowed another unique feature of Lupfer's project. "We chose to produce a prototype which would include all of the features that make a landscape sustainable, and then add options for the individual unit owners, or customers, to fit their personal tastes," he told the participants. While everything met the criteria for a sustainable landscape and was approved by the homeowners association, Lupfer left room for customization.

Lupfer also explained the SITES certification point system with attendees. The system outlines requirements, as well as how many points each is worth.



Roy Diblik

It includes:

- Site selection
- Pre-design assessment and planning
- Site design – water
- Site design – soil and vegetation
- Site design – materials selection
- Site design – human health and well being
- Construction
- Operations and maintenance
- Monitoring and innovation

There are 250 possible points and four certification levels: one star = 100 points; two stars = 125 points; three stars = 150 points; and four stars = 200 points.

It is important, says Lupfer, to build a supportive team. His includes Keven Graham, ASLA, Planning Resources, Inc.; Karen Kabbes, Kabbes Engineering; Lynn Bement, The Garden Coach/Compost Queen; Mark Moxley, Lake Street Landscape Supply; Ed Beaulieu, Aquascapes; and Roy Diblik, Northwind Perennial Farm.

"Determining your team for planning, installation and maintenance helps you represent all aspects of the industry, source materials and features more efficiently, provides accurate site evaluation

and estimating, and addresses all site issues appropriately," Lupfer told the participants.

Lupfer suggests that landscape architects and designers can start small, incorporating little changes into their designs, such as adding a rain garden. "These are easily implemented things that everyone can do this year," he says. Even these kinds of changes can make a difference. For instance, he has reduced the use of granular fertilizer, but added composting

operations, which he then uses on the landscape. He has lowered the use of herbicides by 55 percent by spot spraying.

"These small changes are making things more sustainable, reducing costs and keeping me competitive," he says. ❁



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Maintenance

**This Riverside** residence is used by its owners as a retreat from their hectic schedules and they “don’t want to notice” the maintenance crews. They also have two small children and wanted to reduce the amount of chemicals used on the grounds. The family frequently entertains, so the landscape was well used and often occupied. Add to this the cottage garden style with its intensive maintenance needs — and a challenge was presented. How to exceed the client’s expectations while delivering a product that was both cost effective and environmentally friendly? The solution was a sustainable maintenance program.

Our goal when performing sustainable maintenance is two-fold: reducing the cost of maintaining the property and reducing the resource requirements of the property. To do this, we employ every means at our disposal. The turf was mowed at the

proper height and the blades sharpened on a daily basis. Clippings were “grass-cycled” when not unsightly, and calculated into the nitrogen requirements of the grass. The annual planting area was reduced by more than 80 percent. A permanent bed-

## Lupfer Landscaping Lyons

edge was installed to reduce repetitive edging operations. Drip irrigation was used in the containers. An irrigation audit was performed and the system was only used observationally. A vegetable garden was installed. IPM program visits and annual plantings were scheduled with the regular maintenance crew. Topdressing and overseeding were performed to add organic matter to the soil and biodiversity to the grass. An organic fertilizing program was

used. Locally produced leaf mulch was installed instead of painted wood chips. One hundred percent of green waste was recycled. Most of the shrubs and all of the perennials were hand pruned to reduce emissions and noise pollution. A lighting

system audit was performed to reduce light pollution and energy needs. And finally, a drip line was installed on a rain barrel to capture storm water and feed a fountain, thus reducing potable water usage and the labor required to fill it.

In the end, this project helped us refine what a sustainable maintenance program should include and going forward, we will integrate the lessons we learned into our regular program. ☘