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Western Springs Train Station

When sustainability makes sense...

by Patrice Peltier

Creating sustainable, maintainable landscapes can make cents for your clients while creating new opportunities for you. That's what Tom Lupfer and Roy Diblik did with some new planters at the Western Springs Metra station.

The Village of Western Springs is a long-time maintenance client of Lupfer Landscaping. In 2009, when the village renovated the train station, Lupfer knew there wasn't money in the maintenance budget to cover bedding plants in the four new planters.

The village hadn't really considered the added maintenance costs for the planters, according to Lupfer. If he asked for a bigger budget, the contract could be put out for bid. He didn't want that. So he turned to Roy Diblik, a plantsman and landscape consultant known for his maintenance-oriented sustainable approach. "I went to Roy and said, 'What can you do?'" Lupfer recalls.

Diblik created four planters that provide changing colors and textures throughout the seasons. In early spring, *Narcissus* 'Tete a Tete,' grape hyacinth, and red tulips welcome commuters. For late spring through fall, Diblik selected clump-forming plants that gradually grow wider without requiring a lot of time to keep them in bounds.



After the bulbs, *Nepeta* 'Early Bird' begins blooming, followed shortly thereafter by *Salvia nemorosa* 'East Friesland.' Later, *Allium angulosum* 'Summer Beauty' complements the upright form of *Baptisia* 'Purple Smoke.' *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Golden Showers' adds bright pops of yellow color. Even when the plants aren't in bloom, the wide foliage of the baptisia offers great textural contrasts with the feathery coreopsis foliage and the upright spikes of the allium.

As the season progresses, the vertical pink spikes of *Nepeta subsessilis* 'Candy Kat' contrast with the mounding form and blue, daisy-like flowers of *Kalimeris incisa* 'Blue Star.'

To keep maintenance costs low, Diblik's selections also require no staking or deadheading to look tidy. All are relatively disease- and pest-free and require minimal supplemental watering. What's more, Diblik anticipates these durable plant communities will thrive for many years — limiting replacement costs.

Although it's a planting designed with an eye toward the bottom line, people in the community love it. "We've had nothing but positive responses," says Erik Beck, municipal services coordinator for the village. "People like the way it looks."

"The regular commuters enjoy seeing how it changes over time," adds Lupfer.

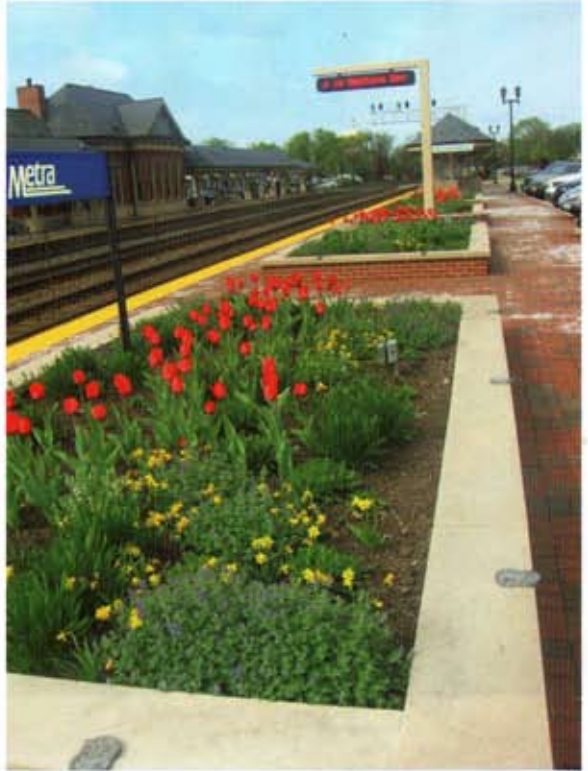
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Beck says he doesn't think residents realize the planters are designed to be easy on the budget. Although citizens enjoy the beauty of the planters, Beck definitely appreciates the economy of this approach. In fact, village planners have already targeted several other areas to be renovated using this sustainable, Know Maintenance approach.

Lupfer says there are two more gardens near the train station that will be renovated this fall, plus three more nearby that will be renovated as funds allow. "Wherever there's a problem landscape, we're tearing it out and replacing it with this kind of planting," he says. "The village likes the low-maintenance aspect, plus the continuity of the look."

Reducing maintenance while adding beauty doesn't have to be complex, according to Diblik and Lupfer. In one of their next projects in Western Springs, Diblik will remove some existing shrubs and renovate others. Then, he'll remove small patches of turf around a building, replacing them with drifts of *Carex flacca*. The cost of Diblik's time and materials will be offset by the reduced maintenance time for all those small, irregular patches of turf. "Tom says he can really save on labor without mowing, trimming and blowing all those small spaces," Diblik notes.

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Know Maintenance Case Study



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Having worked with Diblik, Lupfer knows the maintenance required for the new plantings will be in line with established budgets. "I can put more in because I know I'll be able to maintain them," he says. "Roy's not going to plant something that will require hours of staking, deadheading or treating for disease."

This isn't the first time the Village of Western Springs has tried a lower-maintenance approach to municipal landscaping. "We tried some prairie plantings a while ago, but most people looked at them and said, 'Hey, what are all those weeds?'" Beck recalls. He says residents' responses to the train station planters is much more positive.

Lupfer is pleased that the maintenance of the planters is what Diblik predicted. In their second year, the plants have mostly filled in, requiring little weeding and far less supplemental watering. These days, he says with a laugh, the biggest maintenance job is picking litter out of the beds.

What's more, Lupfer has already parlayed this very visible project into more work. "It's such a showcase garden," he says. "When I'm talking to someone about doing this, I tell them to take a look at the train station. As soon as they see the planters, they say, 'Okay, go ahead.'" Already, he says, he's brought Diblik in to work on eight projects.

"Tom's a do-er. He's ringing bells; he's talking to people; he's selling the idea," Diblik acknowledges. "Tom believes sustainable landscapes are the future."

Whether working with residential, commercial or municipal clients, everyone these days is concerned about holding the line on maintenance costs. But creating a new sensibility can be tough. Having municipal projects like the Western Springs Metra station helps educate consumers that you don't have to have woodchipped annual bedding plants to have attractive plantings.

"The train station project is great because it's a garden people don't intentionally visit," says Diblik. "But they spend five minutes a day there, and they learn something. The same thing can happen in parking lots and boulevards. People can learn that success comes from diversity, not monoculture plantings." 🌿



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