



Common Mistakes to Avoid

BASIC PRINCIPLES
OF SUSTAINABLE
LANDSCAPING

We often make mistakes when planting and caring for landscapes. The good news is most of these errors can be easily

avoided by practicing some basic principles of sustainable landscaping and doing your homework before problems arise.

TO DO/Avoid cutting lawns too short:

Lawns should be mowed at a minimum height of 2.5 – 3" with a sharp blade, and you should never remove more than 1/3 of the blade at a time. Cutting your lawn too short will make the grass more vulnerable to weeds. Higher blade height will encourage deeper root systems, better absorption of moisture and nutrients, and better stress tolerance during heat and dry conditions.

For more information on lawn care, see "LILaC."

TO DO/Water less frequently:

Most landscape plants and turf require just one inch of water per week. By watering landscape plants and lawns too often, you are encouraging the grass roots to remain near the surface. By watering less, you are actually forcing the grass roots to search more deeply into the soil for moisture, resulting in deep, healthy root systems that can tolerate the hot summer months.

For more information, see "Watering & Rain Barrels".



TO DO/Minimize fertilizing:

Lawns in Minnesota are made up of cool season grasses, meaning their heaviest growth period is during the cool months – spring and fall. Such grasses need only be fertilized each fall for a healthy lawn, and possibly in the spring for a lawn that needs a boost.

For more information, see “LILaC”.

TO DO/Plant trees, shrubs and perennials at the proper depths:

When planting most containerized plants, the soil level of the new planting location should match the soil level of the container. When planting most bare root plants, the soil level should meet the point where the roots meet the stem.

For more information, see “Plant Selection”.

TO DO/Match plant species with their preferred growing environment:

Sometimes people choose plants based on appearances, only to get them home and find they have chosen a shade-loving plant for a sunny area. Take note of the environmental conditions prior to going to the nursery – how much sun/ shade a location gets, soil type (Sandy? Clay? Dry? Wet?) and then choose plants accordingly.

For more information, see “Plant Selection”.

TO DO/Take note of the recommended spacing and height requirements for trees and shrubs:

You should always note the grower’s information about plants – the width requirement, the mature height, sun or shade, etc. Woody plants should be planted with mature height and width in mind. Planting too close together will result in lack of air circulation, poor form and potential health problems for the plants. Planting too far apart will result in poor design and dissatisfaction with the final result.

For more information, see “Plant Selection”.

TO DO/Avoid using too much wood mulch:

For a typical planting, 2-3" of mulch is plenty. Woody plants contains lignin, a chemical which gives the plant the strength and physical properties we call “wood”. A great deal of energy is required to decompose wood. By using too much mulch, you are allowing the wood to take nitrogen and other nutrients away from the plants. Too much mulch also attracts detrimental insects and animals such as slugs and moles that like to burrow or like to stay protected in the cool mulch.

For more information, see “Mulching”.

TO DO/Plant species that are hardy for your temperate zone:

In Minnesota, we are in planting zones 3 & 4. Planting zones are based on the average high and low temperatures for our area. Plants that are not hardy for these temperatures and other climactic conditions (e.g. snow, drought) most likely require special protection from weather. By planting species that are proven to flourish in our area, you will have less maintenance and better results. *For more information, see “Plant Selection”.*

TO DO/Brush up on pruning techniques before you make the first cut:

Pruning is an important part of plant care. Pruning our dead or diseased wood or branches that are too close together will improve air circulation and the overall health of the plant. When to prune is as important as what to prune. Pruning certain plants at the wrong time of the year can open them up to a host of disease and insect problems. Always find out about the best time and method of pruning for your particular plant before you make a single cut. *For more information, visit the University of Minnesota Extension Service website: www.extension.umn.edu*

TO DO/Make sure you can accommodate an overly aggressive species BEFORE you plant it:

Sometimes we introduce a new plant to our landscape only to find out it is invasive and choking out the other plants. Be sure to read about or discuss a new plant selection with a professional. Find out how it spreads – by seed, by rhizome, by root – and make sure you are ready to accommodate it. Don't select it thinking you can contain it completely. *For more information, see “Plant Selection”.*