



Guide for Choosing an Eco-Friendly Landscaping Company

Ask the right questions to ensure your property and the environment are safely and sustainably cared for

This guide was created for the homeowner looking to hire a company to design, construct and manage their property utilizing eco-friendly landscape practices. Sustainable landscaping can improve plant health, increase biodiversity, reduce pesticide dependence, and conserve streams and lakes—for greater community and environmental health.¹

Building Healthy Soil *Does the Company...*

Work to improve lawn health?



Grass clippings are a great source of nutrients, contain much needed moisture, and quickly decompose. Lawn health can be improved with “grasscycling” or “mulch mowing.” Grass is finely cut and left to decompose on the lawn where it rapidly breaks down into the soil.⁵ This reduces the need for fertilizers, prevents thatch buildup, reduces time spent on lawn maintenance, and keeps lawn waste out of landfills. To really improve lawn health, consider ecolawn options like microclover which pull nitrogen into the soil to provide flowers for pollinators.



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Does the Company...

Properly prepare & amend soil?



Plant care requires healthy, deep soil. Organic amendments such as compost, grass clippings and straw are biodegradable and environmentally friendly. They increase soil organic matter content—improving soil aeration, water infiltration, and water and nutrient holding capacity.³ Chemical fertilizers are non-biodegradable and often detrimental to the environment. They seep through the soil into the groundwater, polluting water sources and altering soil pH, which can lead to low crop yields.⁴

Conduct soil testing & sampling?



Soil building is integral in creating a healthy landscape. A soil test determines fertility levels and helps with nutrient management. Routine soil testing and sampling is essential for diagnosing landscape deficiencies and assuring proper planting.²

Install native plants?



When designing a landscape, it's best to install plants that will be sustainable in the long term. Choose native plants or those adapted for your zone as they require minimal maintenance while providing important ecosystem and health services (no fertilizer or pesticide requirements, minimal water needs, erosion control, air pollution reduction, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat and food).¹¹

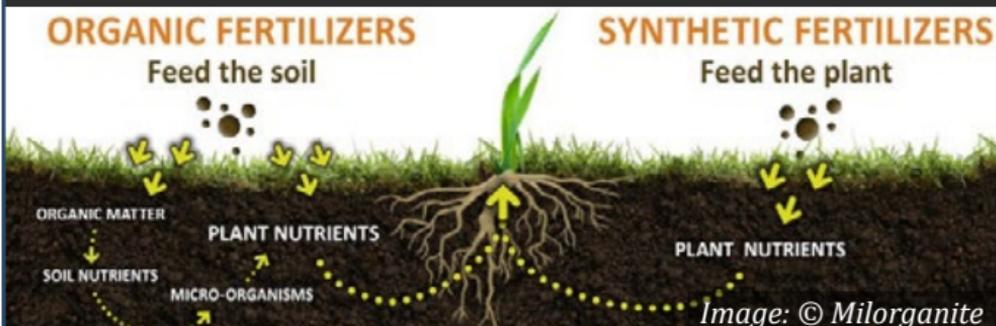
Does the Company...

Mulch beds with organic materials?



Annual mulching with organic materials such as leaves, chips, bark or compost provides much needed weed and erosion control. It retains moisture in the soil, reducing summer watering needs while slowly feeding the soil as it decomposes.⁶

Use natural fertilizers?



It's important to use natural fertilizers that do not harm plants or the environment. "Quick-release" or fast-acting water soluble nitrogen fertilizers can overfeed plants causing damage (slow/no growth, yellow leaves) from accumulated salts, and the excess can wash off into streams and lakes harming aquatic life.⁷ Natural, organic or slow-release fertilizers last longer, are safer for plants, more sustainable for soil health, and less likely to run off.⁸ A fertilization schedule is important for proper plant growth and long-term maintenance.

Design around existing conditions?



Image: Olds College

An inventory and analysis of your yard is critical in the landscape design process so that desired features fit site conditions.⁹ Healthy landscapes fit their site, and a good landscaper will work with what your property already has to offer. Sun and shade areas, slopes, soil types, drainage and moisture all affect which plants will thrive with few disease or pest problems.¹⁰

Natural Weed, Pest & Disease Control

Does the Company...

Use methods like IPM?



When looking to hire a landscaper you should know if they use environmentally safe methods and an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach. Do they monitor for pests instead of spraying pesticides on a schedule? IPM aims to prevent and manage weeds, insects, and diseases rather than control them using chemical pesticides.¹⁰

Regularly maintain & adjust irrigation systems?



Photo: F.D. Richards via flickr.com

Your irrigation plan should fit your soil type. In terms of water evaporation, drip irrigation or soaker hoses provide water directly to the plant's roots therefore reducing evaporation. Automatic irrigation systems can be adjusted by a landscaper for water conservation.

Monitor for beneficials & pests?



The IPM approach requires regular sampling to observe the presence of beneficial and undesired insects, other pests and weeds. Biweekly monitoring is suggested to track whether pests are at acceptable numbers.

Does the Company...

Have strong knowledge of pests?



For pest control to be successful, the landscaper should have a strong background in insect life cycles, weeds and diseases, including identification, so the right strategy is used for each problem.

Install pest-resistant plants?



Photo: bobistraveling via flickr.com

Insect and disease resistance are major factors landscapers should consider when selecting and installing plants. For example plants such as rhododendrons exhibit variations in color (lighter the flower, the more resistant) and leaf characteristics (widened leaf margins) that naturally make them more resistant to root weevils.

Other Credentials to Look for in a Landscape Company:

✓ Experience

How long have they been in the landscape industry? How long have they run their own company?

✓ Education

What horticultural education do they have? What kind of training have they had in IPM, soils, insects, etc.?

✓ Certification

What certifications do they hold? WALP, WSNLA, WASLA, and ISA all have certification programs.

✓ Affiliations

What landscape associations are they part of that keep them up to date on cutting edge research and new sustainable practices?

For example:

- Washington Association of Landscape Professionals, 800-833-2186, www.walpj.org
- Washington State Nursery and Landscape Association, 800-672-7711, www.wsnla.org
- International Society of Arboriculture, www.isa-arbor.com/
- Washington Chapter, American Society of Landscape Architects, 206-443-9484, www.wasla.org
- Washington Chapter, Association of Professional Landscape Designers, www.apldwa.org
- Irrigation Association, www.irrigation.org

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