

Five Keys to Creating an Ideal, Earth Friendly Landscape at Home

By Sue Berg

Eco-friendly alternatives abound for homeowners, both indoors and out. While manicured lawns were once considered the bee's knees, today's progressive home owners desire more inspired and sustainable green spaces to call their own. Leading this approach is Formecology, LLC, an innovative landscape design/build/care company.

"Sustainable outdoor living is our focus," states John J. Gishnock III, CEO and ecological designer. "It means renewable resources, smart designs and a true reflection of the homeowner's lifestyle. Our philosophy is to create beauty for people and the environment."

Gishnock was one of the featured speakers July 18-20 at EcoFair 360, held at the Walworth County Fairgrounds in Elkhorn. The unique, first-time conference brought together experts, exhibitors and participants to exchange knowledge about everything "green," including landscape design, technology, construction, and raising children with green appreciation.

"It was exciting to be surrounded by so many people passionate or just plain curious about being green," Gishnock says. Topics Gishnock addressed were "Designing Attractive Native Gardens," "Gardens of Stone: Expression of Our Local Environment," and "Sustainable Outdoor Living...Beauty Today, A Greener Tomorrow."

Outdoor living space continues to grow in popularity among home owners, according to 2010 research conducted by the American Society of Landscape Architects. Among landscape and garden features, low-maintenance gardens topped the list as the most popular (94 percent), followed by drip/water-efficient irrigation (85.2 percent), and native/adapted drought tolerant plants (also 85.2 percent).

Plants and water are two of the five key components of sustainable site development. These five components will be used by the new, national Sustainable Sites Initiative in its launch of a rating system for sustainable landscapes. In brief, the components are:

Plants: Listen to the wisdom of plants. Native non-invasive species flourish for a reason. Take advantage of low maintenance vegetation; when strategically placed, they can reduce pruning, fertilizing, watering and other care tasks.

Water: Save money by storing stormwater runoff in any of the attractive rain barrels on the market today. Then take it to the next step and create a rain garden, one of Gishnock's specialties. He literally helped write the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources rain garden manual now used widely throughout the United States.

Soil: Minimize compaction and stay off root systems of existing trees and vegetation. Improve soil by adding compost, the ultimate in recycling. Landscape designs can include discreet or disguised spaces used for composting.

Materials: Shape landscape features with recycled or repurposed materials, and check the carbon footprint of imported, exotic materials. The transportation cost could negate savings, both in dollars and emissions.

Lifestyle: Is relaxation the goal of your outdoor lifestyle? Enjoy a low-maintenance bird and butterfly garden with a walking path or small fountain. Is enjoying home-grown organic vegetables your dream? Grow them yourself, and then treat your patio guests with skewers of fire-roasted fresh vegetables.

"Whether it is passive or active outdoor recreation, homeowners are seeking sustainable landscapes that are artistic, practical and restorative," Gishnock says. "The most successful landscapes are holistic," he adds.

"When a home owner is ready to create a personalized green space, we advise them to assemble a team and work with knowledgeable people. Thoroughly analyze your property, and make a list of what you have to work with."

"And remember to work with nature, not against it!"