

Bayscaping: An Environmental Approach to Your Landscape

Susannah S. Dowell

Now that spring is right around the corner, people throughout the country are trading their snow shovels and salt for lawn mowers and fertilizer, gearing up for another busy landscaping/lawn care season. It is astounding to think that, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans use 100 million tons of fertilizer and over 80 million pounds of pesticides each year on only 30 million acres of lawn. Therefore, it is important to remember that the day-to-day decisions you make about maintaining your landscape impact more than just your home's property.

In the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, it is especially important that we consider the effects of our landscaping activities because any chemical that we apply to our lawn will eventually end up in the Bay. The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States, second largest in the entire world. Estuaries are the oceans' nurseries, providing safe and fertile areas for thousands of species of aquatic life to breed, grow and thrive.

Bayscaping is a trend in landscape design that incorporates native plants in your yard wherever possible, minimizing the need for additional water and fertilizers that can pollute surface and ground water. Since bayscapes are designed with plants native to the Chesapeake Bay, they have developed natural defenses to the diseases and insects in the area. They have also evolved to adapt to local soil, rainfall, and temperature conditions. As a result, there is little need for excess water, fertilizers, and pesticides to maintain them.

Additionally, bayscapes eliminate pesticide use by returning natural insect control techniques to the landscape, reinforcing the basic concept that "good bugs eat bad bugs". Using native plants in your landscape will also attract native birds that feed on insects, organically managing the local pest population. In this manner, bayscaping promotes a return to the natural environment, which manages itself if left alone. This is not only healthier for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, it is also less expensive than using fertilizers, pesticides, bag-a-bugs, and other artificial products to control your landscape.

One of the biggest problems facing the Bay is the mismanagement of residential land, or more specifically, the irresponsible overuse of fertilizers and pesticides. The rate of fertilizer used by residential homeowners is astronomical. And what is not absorbed by your lawn ends up in the Chesapeake Bay, creating unnaturally high and unhealthy algae growth. Since nitrogen and phosphorus are the leading components in fertilizers that promote vigorous growth of your lawn, it makes sense that they would have the same affect on the plants and algae in the Bay. Consequently, the algae becomes so thick from the abundance of nutrients that sunlight is actually blocked from reaching the lower depths, preventing submerged aquatic vegetation from growing, ultimately depriving the fish of their food source, natural hiding places and vital oxygen. This in turn affects the entire food chain, as the local birds feed on the fish, and so on.

Still not convinced? Here are several facts to consider about the rate of population growth around the Chesapeake Bay before embarking on your next landscaping project.

- In the Chesapeake Bay region alone, anticipated population growth of the watershed in the next 25 years will mean 3 million new residents.

- An additional 750,000 acres of farm and forestland will be converted to residential housing to accommodate more people.
- Residential housing uses 10 times the rate-per-acre of pesticides used by farmers.

With these facts in mind, it is important to consider the affects of your actions because the Chesapeake Bay is under a fair amount of stress. It is obvious why bayscaping has become a growing trend for environmentally-conscious families and businesses.

Long-term planning and using plants that are native to the area reduces the need for unnecessary chemicals, saving you money and maintenance time because there will be less replanting and up-keep with watering and fertilizing. Native woodland wildflowers are a fantastic way to attract native butterflies and songbirds to your yard; not only do they provide great beauty with their patches of color but they also control unwanted insects. Here are just a few to get you started: Butterfly Milkweed, Smooth Aster, New England Aster, Marsh Marigold, White Turtlehead, Tickseed Sunflower, Moonbeam Coreopsis, Boneset, Wild Geranium, Blue Flag Iris, Blazingstar, Cardinal Flower, Lupine, Bee Balm, Wild Bergamot, Sundrops, and Black-Eyed Susan.

And for more sights and sounds uncommon to typical residential property, ponds are a great idea. A wide range of wildlife species will be attracted to these areas including amphibians and fish, which will, in turn, attract small mammals and waterfowl. There is low maintenance for these areas, besides the periodic replanting of native species, as marsh and wetland areas only require restricted foot traffic to prevent compaction and erosion.

It is no wonder bayscaping has become a popular environmental alternative in landscaping. Using the bayscaping method is a valuable means of contributing to the health of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, saving you time and money in investments of fertilizer and replanting materials.

For more information on bayscaping, please visit:

<http://216.122.176.138/garden/bayscapes/01feb1.htm>

<http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/nativesMD/info.htm>