Community League Newsletter Article

Planning to landscape your yard this summer or looking for ways to freshen up your outdoor living space? Consider going natural!

The City of Edmonton is expanding their resources for Natural Yards to include the topics in this article; these will be available online mid-May 2018.

What is a natural yard?
A natural yard is an ecologically inspired landscaping approach that creates a more natural looking landscape than a conventional turf-dominated yard. These yards emphasize native plant species, support local wildlife, and avoid chemical use when possible.

You do not make a natural yard by not mowing your lawn. The City of Edmonton requires residents to keep their grass to a maximum height of 10 cm. This bylaw is to help prevent unkempt yards.

Benefits of natural yards, over conventional lawns and ornamental planting beds, include lower long-term maintenance costs, being water smart, and reduction of fertilizer and pesticide use. Fertilizer will actually cause native plants to grow too leggy and floppy and pesticide use is not in harmony with attracting wildlife to your yard.

There is often a perception in the North American culture that using native plants leads to a messy or ugly yard. This issue is reinforced by the misconception that natural yards can be grown by casting a packet of seeds and letting the area fend for itself. This method will not achieve the desired results. The first two seasons of growing native plants, perennials in particular, will require diligence in weed control. Native plants need to become established, setting their root network, before the area becomes more resistant to invading weeds. Additionally, just like any landscape, design principles apply to natural yards too.

It is important to know that there are regulated weeds in Alberta that fall under Prohibited Noxious (all parts must be destroyed) and Noxious (must prevent from spreading) weeds. Often commercially available wildflower seed mixes contain invasive species to Alberta - avoid these! They also may not use the scientific name in the contents list. The problem with this is that some plants share the same common name. An example: there are various types of bellflowers but *Campanula rapunculoides* (creeping bellflower) is an invasive one in Alberta. We actually have a native plant that has similar flowers and can be used in its place, *Campanula rotundifolia*.

Before you start any landscaping project, you need to get to know your yard. Take note of existing features, site constraints - make sure to have underground utilities located before any

digging! -, the drainage pattern and sun path through your yard. Next match your needs and wants for your yard to the best suited area based on the information collected in the previous sentence.

Start with any hardscape features, such as pathways and patios/decks. Decide how much lawn area you need, if any at all, and the shapes of your planting beds. For plant selections, try some of Edmonton's local native plants suggested on our webpage. Once established in an appropriate location in your yard, they are easy to care for and are of greater value to wildlife than non-native species! First place any trees; consider views from within the house and whether the tree will block sunlight into the house when mature. Account for mature size as trees are often planted too close to houses or fences. Next place shrubs, then perennial wildflowers and grasses, and finally groundcover plants.

Consider the following design principles when selecting and placing plants:
- Plant perennials in drifts, clusters of plants in a ribbon-like shape through the landscape. This not only creates high visual impact but better attracts pollinators. The exception would be larger specimen (focal point) plants, such as a large ornamental grass.
- Generally, use odd numbers in your planting scheme.
- Select a colour palette. Different colours evoke different feelings and too varied of a palette can feel chaotic.
- Ensure that you have blooming plants in spring, summer, and fall.
- Make sure that you have winter interest. Select shrubs with interesting bark and berries (for birds). Don't cut back your perennials until spring.

Is your existing natural yard feeling a bit too 'wild'? Looking for ways to better connect it within your neighbourhood? Some ideas to consider:
- Edges - if you have lawn space, keep it from encroaching into your planting beds with clean, tidy edges. This immediately makes a yard look maintained.
- Mulch - in addition to the numerous benefits of organic mulch, it provides a rich backdrop for plants, making them stand out more than with bare soil.
- Mow Strip - having a strip of lawn or low groundcover surrounding planting beds, particularly those with tall plants, provides a nice transition zone from neighbouring lawn areas to your natural yard.
- Ornamental Fence, Garden Wall, or Boulders - these features can contain planting beds, adding structure to a space and indicating ownership.
- Decor - a statue or bird bath, as examples, adds a personal touch to a yard. It also brings human context to the space. Wildlife features show the purpose of the yard.
- Path - adding a path meandering through plantings can create an inviting feel and intrigue.
- Seating - this also makes a space more welcoming and has the benefit of giving you a place to view all the wildlife using your natural yard.

Indicating intention within a landscape by demonstrating that it is a space for humans as well as a natural area is key to changing perspective from a 'wild' yard to a beautiful yard.

For more information and in depth discussion on these topics, please visit edmonton.ca/naturalprivateproperty.