

Lessons Learned: Barriers to Implementing Healthy and Water Smart Landscaping



Charles River Watershed Association

Although there are a wide variety of strategies people can use to be more environmentally conscious about designing and maintaining their property, the trend seems to be somewhat slow to catch on. The following are some reasons why people have difficulty in implementing healthier and water conserving landscapes on their property:

- **Keeping up with the Jones':** Many people have a perceived notion of what their yard and landscape should be. Familiar shrubs, an expansive green lawn, and a simple, tidy appearance is often how we think about our yards. The idea of transitioning a large portion of your lawn into a meadow or letting your lawn turn brown over the summer is an idea that is uncomfortable to some. Property owners are often concerned about what their friends and neighbors might think. In order to encourage new ways of designing and caring for landscapes we must first shift the way people think about their yards and outdoor space.
- **Big business:** Perhaps one of the biggest barriers to implementation is the landscape/green industry itself. Like most big businesses, the landscape industry is fairly resistant to change and alternative ways of doing things. Any major operational change costs money and there will be a certain amount of growing pains as new skills are learned and mastered. Many aspects of the industry (e.g., mowing, irrigation, fertilization, etc.) rely on the established way of doing things to remain profitable. Industry professionals need to embrace sustainable landscapes and to begin to incorporate new styles of design and maintenance into their practices.
- **If it ain't broke, don't fix it:** Making a change to your landscape or how you have traditionally maintained your outdoor space can be unsettling to some. Many people are happy with their property and the existing way of doing things. Some people are sentimental about their existing yard, some are resistant to changing their behavior, and some just don't want to be bothered to learn something new. As with anything new, there is a bit of effort involved to get over the initial learning curve and implement change.
- **Taking the easy way out:** There seems to be an impression that landscaping more sustainably will be more work and lead to more maintenance... this is false. In fact, the opposite is true.
- **Ignorance is bliss:** Some people are unaware that their current landscape may be a "water hog" or that they could make their yard more ecologically beneficial. Part of this lack of knowledge/education could be due to a lack of resources or failure to communicate the right information. Landscape professionals, non-profits, land-use planners, and municipalities must all work together to get the message out and educate property owners about the changes they could make to have more sustainable landscapes.
- **Cost considerations:** Any new project comes with costs, whether it is time or money. Property owners often have fairly tight budgets for new landscape projects and often do not have the funds to implement changes.



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Furthermore, some people just do not have the time to devote to planning a new project or working in the garden. That being said, once implemented, healthy and water smart landscapes cost less time and money to maintain, so there is generally a long-term cost savings.

- **Desire to control nature:** Traditionally, landscaping and gardening has been a way for humans to exert their control over nature by using the land and plants to create a place for themselves. Some of the principles of healthy or water smart landscaping requires that we give up some of that control. Letting the lawn turn brown, skipping the pesticides, or allowing some drought-tolerant plants to tough it out during a dry spell can be a tough proposition. We need to be ok with letting nature take control, even if it means that our yards might not always have a pristine appearance.
- **Failure to plan:** It is difficult to implement anything new without a plan. Many property owners find it difficult to have a future vision for their landscape, making it difficult to establish goals and come up with a plan. Without a plan a “to-do” list, it is easy to become overwhelmed and paralyzed. Once a people have a concrete plan they feel much more empowered to get going. Consider working with a landscape designer or a garden coach to help you come up with a vision and translate it into reality.



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