

Growing Green

Easy steps to an eco-friendly garden

By Irene Kew, *The Wave Magazine*

Having a garden doesn't automatically make you green or sympathetic to nature. The use of pesticides, the unbridled growth of invasive plant species, and wastage of precious water can affect the environment. But thanks to sustainable landscaping experts like **Sherri Osaka of Sustainable Landscape Designs** and Alrie Middlebrook of Middlebrook Gardens, the concept of eco-friendly gardens is taking root in the Bay Area.

Sustainable or eco-friendly gardens use less water, fertilizer and chemicals, and they put out less runoff, pollution and waste. "We're trying to use as few resources as possible, and then what resources we do use, we want them to be as natural as possible. In a nutshell, that's pretty much what sustainable landscaping is," **Osaka** explains.



Experts say the secret to creating an earth-friendly garden lies in working with nature, not against it. Be it trading your bed of flowers for native plants or losing your lawn, here are some easy steps you can take toward solving the world's environmental problems in your backyard.

GO NATIVE

Plants native to California thrive in this environment and therefore need little water or fertilizers, and a lot less maintenance. "You [exert] less impact on the natural system by using plants that naturally grow here without any help from human beings," says Middlebrook, who designs gardens with native plants. "You don't use chemicals. You can also crowd out invasive species that are taking over. You're saving human energy and water."

Another advantage that **Osaka** points out is biodiversity. "These are plants that creatures in this area identify with and use," she explains. A native garden fosters a healthy eco-system that's likely to attract creatures such as hummingbirds and butterflies.

California has more than 6,000 species of native plants. To learn more, visit the California Native Plant Society's website (www.cnps.org). Besides selling native plants, nurseries like Woodside-based Yerba Buena Nursery (www.yerbabuenanursery.com) also hold classes.

In a few months, Middlebrook will be opening Green Heart Garden Center on Race Street in

San Jose, where she will hold classes and sell native plants and other products needed to start a sustainable garden. “People can come here to learn how to do this themselves if they can’t afford a professional company,” she says.

LOSE OR SHRINK THE LAWN

With high demands for water, fertilizers and regular mowing, lawns aren’t very environmentally friendly. In fact, Middlebrook has been on a mission to encourage homeowners to lose their lawns (www.losethelawn.com). “If you have a lawn, 60 percent of your household water is going to water [it],” she says. “And you also put chemicals on it to keep it green. The kids are going to be affected by those chemicals. The chemicals stay in the lawn for a long time. Kids track the chemicals onto the carpet and they can stay in the carpeting for up to two years. And another thing about chemicals you use to keep lawns green – it kills the frogs and toads in the neighborhood.”

Osaka says lawns are a fabulous play surface for families with children, but adds that she tries to keep them as small as possible. People who have lawns for decorative purposes can consider options like native shrubs, which require minimal maintenance.

CONSERVE WATER

Create areas that don’t need any irrigation at all, or water by hand if you have the time. But if you really want an irrigation system, drip irrigation is the way to go. “We’re starting to do a lot of subsurface drips instead of having spray heads which are only 50 percent efficient,” Osaka says. “The subsurface drip is almost 90 to 100 percent efficient because the water is delivered right to the roots.”

A new technology to consider is ET (evapotranspiration) controllers, which use data from sensors or local weather stations to determine the amount of irrigation needed. “It’s a little more expensive now, but prices are dropping,” **Osaka** adds.

REUSE

When tearing apart your garden, mulch the plants you’re getting rid of instead of throwing them into the dump. And save the topsoil. “Topsoil is a very precious resource,” explains Osaka. “There are animals and microorganisms in there that you can’t really replace that are key to the health of your soil.” One way to use extra soil you may have is to create berms (little hills) in the landscape or raised beds to add interest.

And save existing trees. “A mature tree provides shelter for the animals and shade. Nothing makes a house look better and it adds tremendous value to a landscape,” says **Osaka**. Make sure you protect them from disruption from construction or digging.

Salvage yards are a good place to hunt for materials such as garden furniture, plants, pots and reusable paving. “It saves you money and keeps things out of the dump,” **Osaka** adds.

USE THE RIGHT MATERIALS

Opt for pervious paving that will allow rainwater to soak in as opposed to running off. “We don’t want the water to flow off, because then the water flows into the storm drain system and upsets the ecology of the Bay,” Middlebrook explains. Go for gravel, decomposed granite or interlocking paving that can be taken apart easily and reused.

“If you do use wood products, get something that’s forest stewardship certified (FSC) because they will guarantee that it was logged sustainably,” says **Osaka**.

SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE EXPERTS

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SALVAGE COMPANIES

Whole House Building Supply & Salvage
1955 Pulgas Rd., East Palo Alto
(650) 856-0634
www.driftwoodsalvage.com

Ohmega Salvage
2400 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley
(510) 843-7123
www.ohmegasalvage.com (website has a list of all the salvage yards in the Bay Area)

NATIVE PLANT RESOURCES

California Native Plant Society
Bay Area Chapter
www.stanford.edu/~rawlings/blazcon.htm

Yerba Buena Nursery
www.yerbabuenanursery.com

Elkhorn Nursery, Soquel road in Aptos
www.elkhornnursery.com

Native Revival, Aptos
www.nativerivival.com