Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan (LINAP) Newsletter

Sustainable Landscaping on Long Island

Did you know that your landscaping practices can play a significant role in protecting Long Island's water quality? This newsletter explores how the Long Island landscape industry is embracing sustainable practices and how you, the homeowner, can make eco-friendly choices for your own landscape maintenance and design.

In a recent conversation with Carol Isles, Administrative Director for the Long Island Nursery and Landscape Association (LINLA), we explore the evolving landscape industry and the shift towards sustainable practices.

LINLA represents over one-hundred-member companies and many more professionals currently working in the horticultural field. Members are comprised of growers, nurseries, landscape firms, designers, and other industry suppliers. Since its creation in 1931, LINLA has worked hard to promote the interests of its members and the professionalism and growth of the landscape and nursery industry through advocacy, education, and scholarship. “Our mission is the health of our industry and our members. The way we accomplish that is through raising the level of professionalism--giving them the education that they need, keeping them informed and supporting the next generation coming up,” said Carol.

Over the last few decades, Carol notes a shift towards sustainability within the landscape industry. This shift, she explains, has been sparked by a heightened awareness of environmental impacts, coupled with emerging research on the interconnectedness of our waterways and human activity. One notable indicator of this shift is the inclusion of slow-release fertilizers, which Carol highlights as a prime example. These fertilizers, designed to release nutrients gradually over time, offer a more environmentally friendly alternative to traditional fast-acting fertilizers. Carol emphasizes the importance of precise application to prevent runoff into waterways. "The three things to note when using fertilizer are calibrating your spreader correctly, timing applications appropriately, and ensuring containment,” she explains. "Even something as simple as making sure your fertilizer stays off the driveway and sidewalk plays a role in preventing the fertilizer from washing into storm drains and polluting waterways.”

Both Nassau and Suffolk Counties have laws in place that ban the application of fertilizer to turf grass when grass is not actively growing. In Suffolk County it is illegal to fertilize your lawn between November 1 and April 1. In Nassau County it is illegal between November 15 and April 1.

Moreover, Carol underscores the significance of the Suffolk County Turf Management Course now required for professionals applying turf fertilizers. This course, she explains, serves as a benchmark in addressing water quality and nitrogen issues, ensuring that industry practices align with environmental stewardship principles. “It's a mandatory step for professionals who apply lawn fertilizer and is included in the Suffolk County consumer affairs licensing process.”

In addition to fertilizer management, Carol states that soil health serves as the foundation for sustainable landscaping, asserting, "healthy soil equals a healthy landscape." She stresses the importance of conducting regular soil testing, as pH and nutrient levels are crucial. pH, which refers to the acidity or alkalinity of soil, determines the effectiveness of nutrient absorption.

Another key aspect of sustainable landscaping highlighted by Carol is the integration of native plants. By definition, these plants, thrive in local conditions, and many not only require less water and maintenance but also provide essential habitat and support for local wildlife. "There's a growing realization among homeowners and landscapers alike that incorporating native plants into landscapes can yield significant environmental benefits while maintaining aesthetic appeal," Carol observes.

Native Plants. Photo Credit: Robin Simmen, Cornell Cooperative Extension Suffolk County

Mulching can also make a difference. Carol provides two definitions of mulching. Firstly, in the context of turf, mulching involves leaving grass clippings in place to decompose and nourish the lawn. This process not only serves as a natural fertilizer but also helps in retaining moisture and regulating soil temperature. “By mulching, you can reduce or eliminate the need for fertilizers while promoting deeper root growth and overall lawn health,” says Carol.

Secondly, mulching in beds involves using natural materials like wood products or compost to cover the soil surface, reducing runoff, suppressing weeds and maintaining soil health.

Mulch being spread. Photo Credit: LIRPC

Carol explains, “Professional landscapers are beginning to feel more comfortable incorporating many of these practices into their business model because the need is starting to grow. The need, the want, and the economics are now starting to come in line. You'll see landscapers with maintenance contracts that will give you different methodologies. Clients

can say, I want to go with the organic slow-release fertilizers or I'm going to leave my clippings in place."

Crucial to this paradigm shift is the empowerment of homeowners through education and access to resources. Homeowners eager to embrace sustainability have a wealth of resources at their fingertips. "Cornell Cooperative Extension, master gardeners, and especially local garden centers are all great resources," says Carol. "These experts can provide guidance on soil testing, plant selection, and sustainable practices tailored to individual properties."

In closing, Carol expresses optimism for the future, citing the increasing demand for sustainable options and the potential for collaboration to transform Long Island's landscapes into symbols of environmental responsibility and beauty. "We're just scratching the surface, but the interest is there," she concludes. "By working together, we can cultivate a landscape that not only enhances our quality of life but also preserves and protects our natural resources for future generations."

Feeling inspired? Talk with your landscape professional about the numerous landscape design techniques available to safeguard the environment while also enhancing the aesthetic appeal of your outdoor space. Keep reading for a few examples to start with.

Reducing Turf and Exploring Alternatives
While a lush green lawn can be appealing, there are areas where turf may not thrive, such as slopes or deep shade. In these cases, reducing turf grass and incorporating native ground covers, ornamental grasses, or low-maintenance plants can provide a more sustainable and visually pleasing alternative.

Choosing Plants that Require Less Nitrogen
By selecting native plants that are adapted to our local climate and soil conditions, we can minimize the need for nitrogen-based fertilizers. Native plants are tailored for our climate and soil conditions and require less water and fewer pesticides. Native plants provide vital habitat for pollinators like butterflies and bees, fostering a healthy ecosystem in your backyard.

Coordinating with Irrigation Specialists
If your landscaping needs irrigation, an irrigation specialist can help you design and install irrigation systems that minimize water waste and maximize water efficiency. Smart irrigation technologies, such as weather-based controllers and drip irrigation systems, ensure that plants receive the right amount of water at the right time, reducing water usage and promoting healthier landscapes.

Xeriscaping
Xeriscaping involves using drought-tolerant plants that require minimal watering. This could be a good approach for Long Island's hot summers. Talk to your landscaper about

incorporating xeriscaping principles into your landscape design for a water efficient and beautiful result.

Soil Testing for Healthy Landscapes
Soil testing assesses the nutrient levels, pH balance, and texture of your soil, providing valuable insights into its health and fertility. Conducting regular soil tests can help to make informed decisions about fertilization, soil amendments, and plant selection, ensuring that your landscape remains sustainable for years to come.

Rain Gardens and Bioswales
Landscapers can help you incorporate rain gardens and bioswales into your existing landscape. These natural filtration systems capture rainwater runoff, filtering pollutants before they reach our waterways. This not only helps reduce nitrogen pollution but also conserves precious water resources.

Incorporating Permeable Surface
Precipitation that falls on asphalt and concrete do not soak into the ground. Permeable surfaces, such as permeable pavers or gravel pathways, are excellent alternatives to non-permeable pavement. These surfaces allow rainwater to infiltrate the soil rather than running off into storm drains.

For more information, please visit the following resources:

- Cornell Cooperative Extension Sustainable Gardening Guides
- Cornell Cooperative Extension Lawn Care
- Cornell Cooperative Extension Lawn Watering Forecast tool
- Northeast Regional Climate Center Lawn Watering Tool
- Suffolk County Healthy Lawns Clean Water Fertilizer Reduction Program
- Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County Home Grounds Fact Sheet