



Enjoy the Outdoors, Improve Water Quality

by Renee Byrd, Byrd Landscape Design

The early warm temperatures have certainly given many of us a case of spring fever this year, with hopes of getting our hands dirty in the garden and enhancing the looks of our landscapes. It is a great time of year to visit a local garden center and get ideas for plant material for your home. I admit that many times I have purchased plants for my own home, not completely sure where they will be planted until I carry them around the yard for a while, testing potential locations. If you do the same, in most cases I'd recommend purchasing at least three of each plant in order to create a mass that will provide unity in the garden.

Working with an experienced landscape designer can be very helpful to develop a master landscape plan for your property so that you have both short-term and/or long-term goals to work toward. A well-designed landscape has the potential for so much more than improving a home's "curb appeal." Plant material can be chosen to attract birds and butterflies, control erosion and filter storm water, and even to function as the walls and ceilings of intimate outdoor rooms.

As a landscape designer, I have the privilege of working with homeowners every day to design attractive and functional outdoor environments that are unique to each client and property. I graduated from Clemson University with a B.S. in Horticulture and M.S. in Plant and Environmental Science. My studies focused on sustainable landscape design for water quality. Over the last ten years, I have been able to combine my love of art and the outdoors to design functional and beautiful landscapes. From tiny lots in New York City to grand estates in the Carolinas, I have enjoyed designing spaces in the landscape for homeowners to enjoy outdoor living, while providing seasonal interest year-round with plant material specifically chosen for each site's unique character.

While curb appeal and outdoor living spaces are usually the top priorities of most of my clients, I aim to achieve those goals while also choosing plant material that is low maintenance, sited appropriately based on the mature size and specific needs of each plant, and including planting areas to filter and reduce storm water runoff. Whether or not a property is lakefront, a landscape design should always take into consideration ways to improve water quality.



Outdoor kitchen



Stone patio

Controlling erosion and filtering storm water are a couple of the many tasks plants take on to protect water quality. The dense, fibrous root systems of ornamental and native grasses make them excellent candidates for the landscape when grouped together as a mass. Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x. acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'), and some varieties of non-native miscanthus (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio', 'Morning Light', and 'Cabaret') are a few favorites that thrive in sunny areas in our climate.

They also provide a fine texture in the garden that contrasts well with many other plants to create variety and interest throughout the year. These grasses are extremely drought tolerant and low maintenance once established. Even in winter months, the brown foliage is attractive, particularly when the sun glistens behind frosted leaves. In late winter or very early spring, I cut the old growth back to about 6 to 8 inches tall (usually with a chain saw for larger grasses, which is an interesting sight!) And every few years, if you would like more of these grasses in your landscape, they can be divided and transplanted easily.

With our mild climate, it is possible to enjoy the outdoors every month of the year. Including a small outdoor seating area to relax with a cup of coffee and a good book, or a larger patio to enjoy evening dinners with the family, encourages you to extend your home into the landscape so that you can enjoy the ever-changing scenery around you.

A pergola shaded by vines provides escape from the brutal summer heat while a sunny portion of a patio can be a great spot to enjoy lunch on a winter day. Paths with bold curves meandering through the landscape can encourage you to explore the blooms, foliage, wildlife, and views around every corner.

Even designing these outdoor rooms and pathways can be accomplished in a way that works to reduce storm water runoff. Pathways can be as simple as mulch defined by plant material on either side. Stepping stones imbedded in mulch, low ground cover, or pea gravel are also great alternatives to impervious concrete paths (a.k.a. storm water super highways). Pervious pavers are a popular choice for patio areas; where storm water is allowed to percolate through the joints into the ground, instead of being diverted away in a traditional mortar joint paver system.



Bold curves, mass plantings



Stone steps lead to pervious flagstone patio and fire pit



Vine-covered pergola and sunken pervious patio

Another option is leaving space between paving stones for very low growing ground cover to grow. Many dwarf sedum varieties, 'Elfin' thyme, and Mazus reptans work well for this, although I would recommend planting these ground covers fairly close together to reduce competition from weeds.

A residential landscape should harmonize with the character of the home and site, while offering a peaceful retreat in nature for the homeowners. Whether you are looking to enhance the look of your landscape, create unique outdoor rooms, or even start with a blank slate, my contact information follows:

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