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Cues to Care

The language of neighborly landscaping

By Sally Elmiger

Yards of native landscapers generally look different. There isn't much lawn. The shrubs aren't trimmed into balls or cones. The perennials are all mixed up, and many get tall...very tall. So what's the problem? People who want their landscapes to benefit nature just have different ideas about how their yard should look, and function. Isn't that okay?

Of course it is. But in the travels of Wild Ones across the country, many of us have encountered folks who aren't knowledgeable about the ecological benefits of native-plant communities, and don't understand why anyone would want their yard to be anything but tidy, clipped, or manicured. Joan Iverson Nassauer, a professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Michigan, looks at Americans' perceptions and misperceptions about nature and the human-built landscape. She interprets her study results in a manner that can guide native-plant enthusiasts to design yards that will be accepted more readily – and possibly appreciated if not actually emulated – by those who have traditional ideas about landscaping.

Perceptions and misperceptions of natural landscapes

Introducing her ideas on designing for ecologically sound/socially accepted landscapes, Nassauer explains some widely held American perceptions about natural landscapes (those that people have not manipulated):

- Areas of high ecological quality are often seen as messy. Messy is okay for uninhabited lands; it is considered a negative quality when applied to human-influenced landscapes, such as our yards or parks.
- The casual observer cannot look at a natural area and determine the ecological benefits it provides. "Scientific processes" are considered invisible. Consequently, the ecological benefits of a native planting in your yard are not obvious.
- Our culture has taught us to look at nature as an "ideal picture" rather than a "process." Therefore, if a natural landscape looks picturesque or "as pretty as a picture," we often identify it as having high ecological quality.

These three perceptions color how people interpret native landscapes placed in urban and suburban environments.

Conventions of human landscapes

Largely, our perceptions define the accepted conventions of human landscapes. Just like the clothes we choose to wear, the landscape we put in front of our house is a reflection of ourselves. Thus people use landscapes to glean information about others. In Nassauer's article, she states that, "Human inhabited landscapes operate...as communication systems (Lynch 1971)¹, and above all other information, *people seek information about other people* when they experience the [home] landscape."

So, what do the elements of a yard's design mean to most Americans?

Nassauer explains: "The dominant culture in much of North America reads a neat, orderly landscape as a sign of neighborliness, hard work, and pride." *Neat* and *orderly* could be translated into mown lawn, trimmed shrubs, and well-tended flowers in designated flower beds. If a yard is designed for ecological benefits and doesn't contain these elements, it could be perceived as messy. It sends negative signals that the homeowner isn't caring for his/her yard, and is, therefore, not neighborly, not hard working, and doesn't have any pride. While we know this isn't necessarily just or true, it's important to understand the interpretation our culture makes of how a home landscape is seen.

A seemingly conflicting finding

Nassauer notes that, "A large body of landscape perception research...leaves no doubt that people prefer to see landscapes that they perceive as natural." However, "too much nature" is unappealing.

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Thus, even though people say they prefer natural landscapes, what they are really saying is that they prefer landscapes that meet their “pretty as a picture ideal” of what nature should look like, and that ideal includes signs of human intention and neatness.

So why is neatness so important? “Neatness,” Nassauer explains, “is interpreted as a sign of sociable human intention. Neatness cannot be mistaken for untended nature; it means a person has been in a place and returns frequently. It means a place is under the care of a person.” Therefore, native landscapers practicing their art in an urban/suburban setting need to provide viewers with visual cues that communicate that the landscape is cared for, that the homeowner intends it to look this way, and that it shows elements of neatness. In other words, to provide a “cultural frame for viewing nature” (or landscapes designed with native plants) in a new way.

Studying the situation

To get a better idea of what signals in a landscape communicate care, intention, and neatness, Nassauer conducted a study in a suburban community of Minneapolis-St. Paul. In this study, she asked participants to rate seven computer-simulated landscapes that progressively increased in ecological complexity. The simulations started with a conventional suburban landscape, and then progressively covered the lawn with beds of native plants. Both an oak savanna community and a prairie grass community were used. The last simulation showed the conventional yard covered in weeds.

Raters preferred the conventional landscape the most. But a close second was the yard covered 50 percent by the oak savanna plant community. The oak savanna plants were in garden beds “framed” by the lawn. Nassauer concludes that “...novel suburban landscapes are more likely to be attractive if they look neat and well cared for.”

The five criteria used in the study included: Attractiveness, care, neatness, naturalness, and apparent need for maintenance. The association of these five characteristics to each other sheds light on what can make a suburban landscape attractive. On the conventional landscape end of the spectrum (up to and including the 50 percent native plants), these landscapes were considered neat and cared for, and therefore attractive. The 50 percent native landscape’s “naturalness” qualities also made it attractive. However, more than 50 percent native plants, or obvious lack of care (weedy lawn) made a landscape unattractive. These results “support the conclusion that ‘neatness’ labels a landscape as well cared for, and that ‘naturalness’ is defined by cultural expectations. Trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses look attractive unless there is ‘too much.’ Then the immediate cues to care, the presence of human intention, are lost.”

Applying the lessons learned

How can native landscapers apply the results of Nassauer’s research? How can we make our yards – that are full of native plants serving the environment – appeal to our neighbors? How can we help this new landscape design form to become the new “conventional”?

Nassauer contends that, “Cues that indicate human intention are cultural symbols that can be used to frame more novel ecosystems in inhabited landscapes. Using ‘cues to care’ in design is not a means of maintaining traditional landscape forms but rather a means of adapting cultural expectations to recognize new landscape forms that include greater biodiversity. ‘Cues to care’ make the novel familiar, and associate

ecosystems, which may look messy, with unmistakable indications that the landscape is part of a larger intended pattern.”

Her suburban research uncovered several ways to indicate care when we design our yards with native plants:

Mowing Mown strips along bordering properties, pathways, drive-ways, or sidewalks help to indicate that your yard is cared for. A mown strip along a property boundary or sidewalk helps prevent tall plants (which sometimes flop over) from infringing on your neighbor’s property or interfering with people walking along the sidewalk.

Flowering plants and trees Nassauer’s research suggests that the small flowers of some native plants “tend to be misunderstood as weeds.” Therefore, plant an “unnaturally high” proportion of plants with larger, brighter flowers at least for the first few seasons. People also tend to appreciate trees more than shrubs or tall grasses.

Wildlife feeders and houses People may not be able to identify a bird’s habitat requirements, or like these habitats when they see them. However, they associate birdhouses and feeders with something they like. Add them to the planting.

Bold patterns Nassauer’s research on farmland has revealed that large areas with bold patterns, such as terracing or grassed waterways (practiced for soil-conservation purposes) indicate care to farmers and non-farmers alike. This is true even on a smaller scale, showing care through crisp edges. Rick Meader, landscape architect and Ann Arbor Chapter Wild One’s member, wrote an article that talks about the edges he incorporated into his home landscape. For his experiences with “cues to care,” read his post at annarbor.com/home-garden/is-it-a-weed-patch-or-a-garden/.

Trimmed shrubs, plants in rows, linear planting designs All these practices indicate human intention and care.

Fences, architectural details, lawn ornaments, fresh paint Well-maintained structures, such as homes, fences, and sheds indicate a property is cared for, and reflects positively on the landscape. Garden ornaments, and architectural details such as flower boxes or shutters also show human intention on a property. In the Midwest, the color white on buildings and fences is closely associated with care.

Foundation planting Plants along the foundation of a home are almost as sacred to the American landscape language, as is the lawn. Nassauer notes that this “nearly unassailable cultural expectation for the home landscape” should cover the foundation, but not get in the way of windows or doors. They should not obstruct views and lines of vision.

Let your landscape do the talking

Nassauer’s work enlightens us as to what we, as advocates of ecological landscaping, can do to spread the “word.” Using the “cues to care” techniques in our yards will speak to each passerby in a language that he or she understands, telling each that our native plantings are an intentional expression of how we value nature and what it does for us. We can hope that these familiar reflections of care will draw people into our landscapes, and give us all an opportunity to start conversations about how native plants can benefit our homes, neighborhoods, and communities. ☺

Footnote:

Lynch, K. 1971. *Site Planning*. 2d ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.