

THE APPROPRIATE LANDSCAPE

By Gene Twaronite

Landscape designers often refer to the appropriateness of a particular form or plant material within the general theme or concept of a landscape. But it can also refer to whether the landscape itself is appropriate to the total environment.

Thus, for example, introducing a boulder may not be appropriate in a highly formal landscape. In a more natural landscape, however, a boulder can act as a visual focal point or help to break up groupings of plant materials. But there is more to the boulder than simple aesthetics. It can also help to break up the continuity of fuels that might carry a wildfire to your house. By providing a cool pocket of moisture underneath, a boulder can also help to “water” an adjoining plant. And, coupled with other rock materials, it can be part of a terrace to prevent erosion. In landscaping, as in nature, we can never do just one thing.

Designers are increasingly asking if a given landscape is ecologically responsible or sustainable within the larger framework of its surroundings. In you live in a wildfire-prone area, for example, this means taking into the account not just the possibility but the likelihood of a wildfire occurring in your landscape. How would a fire move through your landscape? Is there an uninterrupted path of fuels leading to your house? Are the trees and shrubs in your landscape so dense that firefighters would be unable to safely fight fire around your home? Are the plants you have chosen so highly flammable that they would accelerate the spread of fire? Would a wildfire be likely to spread from your home and endanger your neighbors and the surrounding forests and woodlands with a catastrophic wildfire?

Since we also live in a water limited state where the combined annual amount of water loss due to surface evaporation and plant growth greatly exceeds the annual amount of precipitation, it also makes sense to ask questions about water use in our landscape. Are the plants we have chosen compatible with our arid climate? Or will the plants require so much additional water that they will be difficult to keep healthy and firewise while straining precious groundwater supplies?

As gardeners and landscapers, we often try to grow plants we know we shouldn't. Perhaps it is nostalgia for a childhood garden or just to prove our gardening prowess. While living in New England, I enjoyed using hostas in my garden because of their varied foliage and dense mounding growth habit. With their profuse large leaves, hostas require lots of water. They are thus appropriate for a garden in New England that might receive 40-45 inches of annual precipitation. I miss growing them, now that I live in Arizona, but I would no more think of planting a hosta here than planting an agave in Alaska.

Aldo Leopold was a professional forester and wildlife manager who spent much of his early career working with the U.S. Forest Service in the Southwest. He wrote of the need for thinking about land in more than simply economic terms and for an “ethical obligation on the part of the private landowner. He expanded the boundaries of the human community to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” In our strivings for appropriate landscapes, there can be no better guide than this summary of his land ethic: “A thing is right

when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

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