Did you know that water is sticky?

The unusual polar nature of water, + and – charges on the same molecule, make it want to stick to just about everything it touches, including itself! When rainwater travels through the air and then landscape, it sticks to various particles and chemicals that may be present, caries them into storm drains, ditches and streams. Eventually, water in our area flows into the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, and then to the Chesapeake Bay. Water runoff carries both quality topsoil and hazardous chemicals to these waterways, clogging them with silt, poisoning wildlife and our drinking water.

So how do we combat these effects of water's stickyness? Mother Nature has given us the best weapon, PLANTS! Plant roots hold soil in place while the leaves provide something for water to stick to before it can pick up the soil. Because the water sticks to the plants, water's movement from falling as rain and running into a river is slowed so that it lingers, and more of it is absorbed by the soil. There, beneficial micro-organisms can properly break down pollutants that may be present. The greener your land, the bluer your water!

In the city, many places do not have a forest of plants to slow down and capture water. Creative solutions such as "rain gardens" or English wells may be helpful to catch and slow the water runoff. Also, runoff from paved surfaces can be reduced by using permeable paving materials so that more rain soaks in right where it falls.

Working with the Sun

Shade from trees reduces air conditioning needs and makes non-air conditioned homes more comfortable. Ideally, plant deciduous trees so they will shade east-facing walls and windows from 7 to 11 a.m. and west-facing surfaces from 3 to 7 p.m. during June, July and August. Trees with mature heights of at least 25 feet should be planted 10 to 20 feet east and west of the house. Plant smaller deciduous or evergreen trees with lower limbs northwest and northeast of the building to provide late afternoon and early morning shade. In the fall, the leaves will fall off and allow direct sunlight to warm your home.

Landscape Lighting

Artificial lighting is often used in the landscape to accentuate the form of plantings, structures and art pieces after dark. However, traditional 110 volt incandescent lighting consumes a lot of energy; approximately 720 watts for an average system! Try using newer LED 12 volt installations which use 50 watts, AND the bulbs last longer. Generally an LED bulb lasts 20,000 hours, making it the most efficient light available. An LED light can be turned on every night for 18 years before it fails. Fluorescent lighting lasts approximately 8,000 hours, xenon bulbs 5,000 hours, and all you can expect from traditional incandescent bulbs is 1,000 hours. So LED bulbs use less energy and last longer. Sounds like a "win-win", doesn't it?

When the rain stops falling...

When plants in our landscape do not receive enough water to live, some kind of irrigation becomes necessary if we're going to keep things healthy and attractive. However, portable sprinklers and manual hose-watering are not just a hassle, but they WASTE WATER! If you want to conserve water and still keep things alive, a computer controlled, smart irrigation system with a rain gauge, soil moisture meter, custom watering zones and timing, will make sure that each planting area gets just the right amount of water at just the right time. Drip irrigation hoses, or better yet, individual soil mounted plant nozzles can further increase water conservation where applicable.

Do you really need all that lawn?

Did you know that lawns require more resources and energy to maintain than any other type of landscape area? Three million tons of fertilizers, 7 billion gallons of water, and $30 billion dollars are applied to lawns each year. Consider replacing the majority of your lawn with low-maintenance ground covers, shrubs, perennials and trees. If you desire to keep some lawn, it can actually benefit from allowing "beneficial weeds" to remain. For instance, clover mixed in with your grass actually adds nitrogen to the soil, keeping the whole lawn area greener and healthier. That means you can use less herbicide AND less fertilizer.

Sustainable Landscape Maintenance

Everyone knows that regular weeding, pruning, raking and mowing is necessary to keep their landscape looking good. But what do you do with all this plant matter when you're done tidying up? If you bag it up and throw it out with the trash, you're doing the Earth and your landscape a disservice! Find a tucked-away place to create a small composting bin or purchase a composting system that's sized right for your property. Grass clippings, soil, kitchen waste, wood chips, and leaves work well to break down into rich organic matter filled with nutrients. Heat created in the process kills weed seeds too. Regularly amend your planting beds with the compost and your plants will prosper while reducing your chemical fertilizer needs! Also, if you're having work done that involves a lot of larger branches, have them chipped and used as mulch.

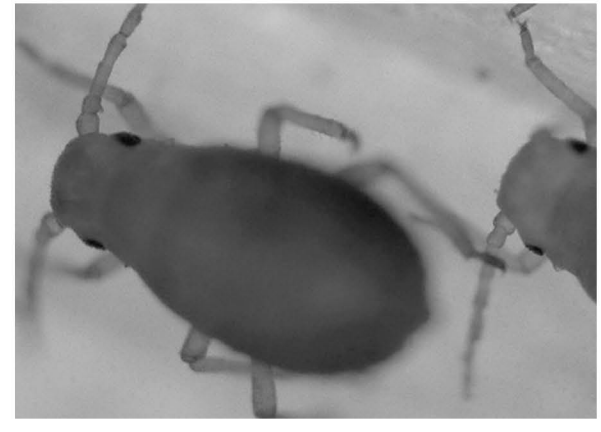
Recycling of Hard Landscape Materials

If you're doing a complete renovation or new construction in your landscape, look into having the materials removed during demolition recycled. Many paving and masonry materials can be reused or recycled into other useful materials and products.

What to do About Plant Pests

The best thing a homeowner can do is to monitor their plants at least on a monthly basis during the growing season. This allows problems to be noticed quickly, before they get difficult to reverse. Secondly, there are many plant pathogens which exist only at a nuisance or minor level. When this is the case, it is better to let beneficial insects and natural plant defenses go to work at resolving the problem.

There may be cultural practices that can be changed, such as less/more water and fertilizer, or mulching that may improve the situation. If all of this fails, there may be times where a treatment may be warranted. This application should be targeted at the offending pathogen and organic if possible. Also, make sure the treatment is applied exactly as directed. Over application generally decreases efficacy and most likely has not been EPA tested to be safe.



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